There's never been a better time to be a woman? Gendered discourses on the route to the boardroom

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Awarding institution:
King's College London

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO BE A WOMAN? GENDERED DISCOURSES ON THE ROUTE TO THE BOARDROOM

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A thesis submitted to King's College London for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management Research

May 2017

Abstract

The lack of women on boards has galvanised much public and policy interest in recent years, which has led to many countries introducing quotas or voluntary targets. In the UK, the Lord Davies' (2011) report set a target of 25 per cent women on boards by 2015. It also recommended that greater transparency and rigour be brought to the recruitment process, which has traditionally been opaque, and recruited from a narrow pool. Given that the gender target has been met, it is often presumed that this is evidence for greater transparency in the appointment process; however, very little is still known about the way that directors are recruited, or how this process may be gendered.

This thesis examines the recruitment process of non-executive directors in the UK, through the experiences of those individuals going through the process. Longitudinal qualitative interviews were conducted with men and women seeking non-executive director (NED) roles on FTSE 250 and FTSE 100 boards. Through a collaborative sponsorship with an executive search firm who afforded access to aspiring directors, this research provides a deep analysis of the board appointment process. Utilising longitudinal methodology and a discourse analysis, this thesis examines the language and linguistic candidates use to make sense of their experiences, the consistencies and inconsistencies in their accounts of the process, and how their sense-making discursively creates meaning. It outlines how aspiring board candidates discursively construct the ideal board member and how they position themselves towards this ideal, the networking practices they perform to gain access and visibility with appointing boards, and how they make sense of success and failure. This reveals how the process is gendered: candidates draw on gendered language to make sense of an unpredictable and complex appointment process.

The research draws on and contributes to three key literatures. First, it contributes to research on women on boards, through showing how the notion of an ideal board member is constructed, challenging human capital explanations for women's absence from boards, while demonstrating the importance of subjective factors and 'fit' with the board. It also demonstrates how aspirant directors navigate the appointment process through their networking practices, and how these networks and networking practices are gendered. Second, it contributes to theoretical work on gender and organisation, highlighting the value of a gendering organisation approach to board diversity that moves beyond 'body counting' as a measure of success. Third, it emphasises the importance of placing women on boards in a wider social context, understanding them as a members of a corporate elite. It argues that the appointment process operates as a gendered, elite closure mechanism, which is discursively maintained through elite norms of recruitment.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Elisabeth Kelan, for her guidance throughout this PhD. Thank you for your immeasurable comments and feedback on my work, and for being both an inspirational mentor and a tireless sponsor throughout the project. I have been immensely fortunate to have a supervisor as committed as you are, and who believes in my work so wholeheartedly.

I would also like to thank Ros Gill, Aditi Gupta, Jon Hindmarsh and Sharon Mavin, for being there at the moments when I have needed them most. I would also like to thank Stephanie Taylor and Cathrine Seierstad for their examination of this thesis and their helpful feedback.

Thank you also to Kate and Sally at Sapphire Partners for their sponsorship of the project; to Jess of the delightfully named 'The Filthy Comma' for her excellent proofreading of the thesis; and to my colleagues at Grant Thornton for their support and understanding when faced with a PhD student in the final throes of her thesis.

A PhD can be an isolating and lonely experience, and I could not have completed without the unwavering support of my friends and family. There are far, far too many to mention you all by name, but I owe endless thanks for moments of encouragement, wisdom and support throughout the last four years.

A special thank you, of course, goes to my parents Melanie Brown and Peter Goodridge, who raised me the critical feminist I became, taught me to believe in myself as much as they do, and have offered every possible kind of support they can come up with to get me to the end. Also to Mark and Ann Goodridge, for opening up their home as a writer's retreat for a stressed PhD student whenever I have needed to escape.

I also want to thank Tegan Creedy, for her eye for detail, her limitless positive energy, and for being the only person who enjoys being in the library on the weekend more than me. Also to Lucy Davies, who after fifteen years of friendship still calls every morning to check I'm alive and happy, even when she is on the other side of the world.

A special thank you also to Henry Redwood, for immeasurable amounts of academic support, comments on drafts of the thesis and PhD student solidarity, for emotional stability, and for cooking countless delicious meals I will never be able to repay.

Finally, it is a cliché only made true in its repetition, that behind every successful woman there is a group of successful women cheering her on. Tessa Cole, Emily Miles, and Elle Wadsworth; my squad, my girl band and my coven of witches; it is no exaggeration to say this thesis would not have happened without you, and your emotional support, encouragement, and limitless belief in me. This thesis is dedicated to you, and to the immense power of sisterhood.

1. Introduction

The lack of gender diversity and absence of women from corporate boards of directors has been a key issue in recent years, in academic literature, media outputs, and in wider societal discourse (De Anca and Gabaldon, 2014; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Post and Byron, 2015; Seierstad and Opsahl, 2011; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015; Torchia *et al.*, 2011). Women currently only hold twelve per cent of corporate board roles globally (Deloitte, 2015). The relatively small number of women in these roles is widely regarded as an issue that businesses and countries need to address: both from a utilitarian perspective and a social justice perspective. The former argues that the lack of women on boards is an issue for companies due to their being a 'business case' for women directors; women are an untapped pool of potential talent that can improve board or company function by increasing the diversity of board members (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). A social justice perspective points to the lack of women on boards as representing a problematic imbalance of power. As boards hold highly powerful roles, both within their organisations and in wider society, the lack of women must be addressed on grounds of social fairness and equality (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015).

Since the introduction of gender quotas in countries such as Norway, many other countries have followed suit in addressing gender imbalance on boards either by introducing legal quotas, or through tackling the issue with softer, voluntary measures, such as targets and recommendations (Seierstad, 2016). In the UK this manifested in a business-focused, 'collaborative' approach (Seierstad and Opshal, 2011): a collaboration between Government, academics and businesses, and agreed commitment to address gender diversity on boards. Since 1999, academic researchers at Cranfield University have produced 'Female FTSE' reports (Sealy *et al.*, 2007; 2008a; 2009; 2016; 2017; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012; 2013; Vinnecombe *et al.*, 2010; 2014; 2015), which track the progress of women into UK boardrooms, by establishing a Female FTSE Index: ranking companies on their gender diversity and naming and shaming companies with little or no gender diversity. Building on this starting point, in 2011 the government produced the 'Women on Boards' report

(Davies, 2011), commonly referred to as the Davies report, which set a target for 25 per cent women on boards by 2015. This report drew heavily on the business benefits of appointing women directors, with an underlying presumption that having more women on boards will have a trickle down effect on gender-equality. The combined efforts of corporate institutional and individual actors, state encouragement and pressure from the media (Seierstad *et al.,* 2015) saw the number of women on FTSE 100 boards rise from 12.5 per cent in 2011 to 25 per cent in 2015 (Seierstad *et al.,* 2015; Vinnicombe *et al.,* 2015), meeting Lord Davies' target.

While women on boards have received a great deal of examination over the last fifteen years, research into how directors are appointed has been much more limited (Withers *et al.,* 2012). Research on women on boards has primarily looked either at the characteristics of women who make it onto boards (Bilimoria, 2000; Burgess and Theranou, 2002; Burke, 2000; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004) and sought to explain their absence through human capital or social capital explanations, or has looked at the impact female board representation has on governance, business effectiveness or existing board-level power dynamics (Ahern and Dittmar, 2011; Biggins, 1999; Brammer, 2009; Daily *et al.,* 1999; Huse, 2008; Matsa and Miller, 2011; Sheridan *et al.,* 2011; Wang and Kelan, 2012).These two foci stem from a desire either to explain women's absence from the boardroom, in the case of the former, or the need to build a business case for female board representation in the case of the latter. Whilst both of these perspectives have been crucial to encouraging companies to appoint more women onto their boards, the narrow focus of the research has been at the detriment of research into the board appointment process. They also have less commonly compared women's experiences with that of men's; comparison between men and women is largely quantitative.

Research into women on boards has also rarely utilised a gender perspective, or adopted qualitative methodologies. The focus on appointing women has primarily utilised a 'body counting' starting point (Calás *et al.*, 2014; Martin, 2001); even while aiming to account for broader processes and areas of bias, in their explanations for women's absence, they use functionalist and positivist

orientations that start from the aim of comparing men and women directors. In such models, gender is treated solely as a category for comparison, rather than as something continuously 'done' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or 'performed' (Butler, 1990). Research into the appointment process has also relied solely on the accounts or traits of current directors – i.e. those who have been successful – rather than taking an emic approach (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012) that accounts for the experiences of individuals seeking board roles. This absence is in large part due to the difficulty gaining access to aspiring directors: they are an elusive population, and are contained within an elite that is notoriously difficult to gain access to (Hill, 1995). This contributes to the majority of research in this area relying on quantitative analysis of publicly available data. The study of women in elite roles, and particularly the subject of women on boards, has also rarely been addressed from a feminist perspective: either through advocating for change on the grounds of a social justice perspective, or that utilises feminist methodology. This is in part due to a perception that because those women in senior roles have already succeed, their experiences have little to offer those studying barriers to women's progress. It is therefore seen as a 'luxury problem' (Adams, 2014) or 'un-feminist' (Sang, personal communication) to study women on boards as a potential area for understanding gender inequality.

Although the issue of women on boards has been discussed to some extent in the corporate governance literature, research has also less readily placed boards within a wider social context, by connecting it to research on social elites. Processes of globalisation have seen the emergence of a new corporate business elite, and there is a need to connect this growing literature in order to understand women on boards as a specific population that warrant in-depth analysis. Members of corporate boards can be conceptualised as members of the corporate 'wealth elite' or 'professional executive class' (Bennet *et al.*, 2009; Savage *et al.*, 2013): in a recent large-scale study into class in the UK, Savage and colleagues (2013; 2015) identified this class as sitting above all other classes, made up of the most senior and elite individuals in society, but as culturally different to a historical understanding of the upper classes. Savage and colleagues argued that the identification of the financial elite necessitates further investigative study, to explore this elite's existence beyond demographic

categorisation (Savage, 2015). It is therefore highly valuable to locate concerns with the representation of women in senior elite roles as a concern, and as advocating a need to understand, elites more broadly. Through examining the specificities of aspiring directors, the closure mechanisms of this demographic can be explored.

There is also an increasing focus on women in corporate elite roles (Mavin and Grandy, 2014; 2016b), recognising a need to understand women in these spaces beyond a tokenistic consideration or simply as the 'Other' in relation to men. Until relatively recently the political, social and business elites have been almost exclusively male, and there have simply not been enough women in these spaces to study in their own right, without resorting to tokenism, or body counting perspectives. As Mavin and Grandy point out in their recent research into women in elite roles, 'women elite leaders remain rare [and] their experiences are under-researched' (2016b, p.394; see also Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Other work on gender and elites – most notably that of Mavin and Grandy (Mavin, 2006; Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2014; 2016a; 2016b) has highlighted how women in these spaces have to be seen to be doing 'gender well and differently' (*ibid.*) negotiating expectations that they are feminine and their outward expression is congruent with their gender category ('doing gender well') while also fitting into the masculine norms of elite leaders ('doing gender differently'). The tensions of these two 'doings' place women in elite roles at the nexus of being 'sometimes' privileged; while they hold positions of power, their privilege is contested due to gendered expectations, and has to be defended. The authors argue that this necessitates further examination of women in these roles, to gain an understanding of how they confer, contest and defend privilege (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a).

Because they are simultaneously privileged – holding positions of power in the corporate elite – and abject – feminised subjects in masculinised spaces – women in this corporate elite have to work, both literally and discursively, to hold on to that privilege. This practice has been identified through ethnographic work into women who occupy minority positions in highly masculinised spaces, such as in banking and finance industries (Fisher, 2012; McDowell, 1997); however it has not been applied

to the case of corporate directors. The role of the corporate director and the boardroom is often presumed to be a masculinized space that women need to 'fit' into (Pye, 2001), although this assumption is largely based on the sheer number of men in these spaces, rather than on understanding how gender is enacted. Broader research into corporate governance suggest it operating under norms of British upper class society or 'gentlemanly capitalism' (Augar, 2001), and the way directors are appointed is frequently categorised by informality, opacity and a reliance on being known to the board, which may disadvantage women who begin this process outside of the "club". The case of women on boards therefore can provide a case study of a particular kind of elite leader, within an area that has seen a fast increase in the number of women, and insight can be gained into this particular elite of women, their experiences, and how they make sense of their position. Similarly by locating the case of women on boards within its wider social context, a broader and deeper understanding of the appointment process can be drawn, using class (and gender) to 'strategically open up issues of concern (Savage, 2015, p.224).

To address the importance of these wider social discourses and understand women on boards within these contexts, this thesis examines the recruitment process of non-executive directors, through the experiences of individuals going through the process, and through examining their sensemaking and discursive repertoires. Longitudinal qualitative interviews were conducted with men and women seeking non-executive director (NED) roles on FTSE 250 and FTSE 100 boards, who were interviewed three times between 2013 and 2015, during which time there was an unprecedented focus on getting women on to boards in the UK media, business community and academia (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). Through a collaborative sponsorship with an executive search firm, who afforded access to aspiring directors, this research provides a deep analysis of how the board appointment process discursively operates to shape applicants' experiences and expectations of the process, how this relates to closure mechanisms at play in the corporate director 'elite', and how these are gendered. This thesis therefore seeks to answer Terjesen and colleagues' (2009) call for more 'innovative' research into women on boards; Mavin and Grandy's (2014; 2016) call for greater empirical

understanding of women in elite roles; and to respond to the acknowledgement in the sociological literature that understanding new corporate elites requires gender analysis (Gucksburg, 2015).

To do so, a social constructionist understanding of gender is adopted – seeing gender as something continuously 'done' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or 'performed' (Butler, 1990), rather than simply comparing the experiences of men and women. This is done through using discourse analysis: examination of the language and common linguistic structures or *interpretive repertoires* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) candidates use to make sense of their experiences, and how this, in turn, discursively creates meaning. Importantly, this research has included both men and women seeking director roles, to explore how each group discursively understands and make sense of their experiences, and how (or if) these accounts differ. This in particular seeks to challenge the current literature's narrow conception of gender as being solely about which particular bodies occupy which spaces.

Temporally, discourse analysis sees language use as 'occasioned', and highly specific to the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Discourse analysis therefore often treats consistency in individual's narratives as representative of a repeated requirement of the function of the discourse, and rejects the notion that consistency represents evidence of a truth or inner psychological state of being. It therefore frequently focuses instead on inconsistency in individual's discourse. When conducting longitudinal research using discourse analysis, it becomes more important to address consistency, particularly in cases where individuals are remarkably consistent between interviews that are several months or years apart. A longitudinal approach therefore highlights this consistency particularly as it allows for patterns in the interviewees repertoires to come to the fore. A longitudinal discourse analysis is thus adopted, drawing on narrative-discursive method developed by Taylor and Littleton (Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Taylor, 2015), that advocates the utilisation of aspects of narrative sense-making (Brown, Stacey and Nadhakumar, 2008) to a discourse analysis.

The research covers three key themes that emerge in candidates' accounts of the board appointment process. First, it reveals how aspiring directors discursively construct the ideal board member, how the ideal is gendered, and how its existence relies upon and reproduces meritocratic discourses: a belief that the most suited will be the most successful. This reveals how subjectivity is implicit in the construction of the ideal, and how candidates account for a bias towards those who are deemed to 'fit' with the board. Second, it examines how they describe their networking practices, and how social and gendered expectations about what will lead to success affect how aspirant directors are able to network to gain access to the boardroom. Candidates see networking as the primary route to success, but adopt contradictory discourses about what will lead to success, advocating the need to be both strategic and subtle in their networking. Their justifications for this are gendered, suggesting their netowkring practices are influenced and constrained by gendered expectations. Finally, it explores how aspiring directors make sense of their success and failure, and how these sensemaking discourses are gendered: women advocate a need to 'lean in' while men assert a need to 'sit back' to engender success. It also highlights how men externalise failure while women internalise it, and reveals a strongly mobilised discourse in candidates' sensemaking that there has 'never been a better time to be a woman'. This latter point has policy implications: it suggests that the women on boards target set by Lord has acted as a 'soft quota' for businesses; this preference for women is attributed to the target and is not representative of collective, feminist action or belief in a business case for board diversity.

When examined together, analysis of the board appointment process in these areas contributes to three key literatures. The first is the extant research into women on boards. The women on boards research literature is largely descriptive rather than theoretical (Terjesen *et al.*, 2009; Sealy *et al.*, 2017), and relies on publicly available data and quantitative analysis. This research provides an in-depth and theoretically grounded analysis of how directors are appointed, drawing on and addressing a range of the women on boards research conclusions. It contributes to both the human capital and social capital explanations for the lack of women on boards – the majority of research has focused on

one or the other – by showing how the human capital explanation is embedded in aspirant directors understanding of their role, and how the reliance on social capital is navigated by aspirant directors. In both cases, adopting a theoretical gendered analysis and a qualitative research design has deepened our understanding of antecedents to board diversity.

This research also draws on and contributes to the wide literature on gender and organisations. It brings a 'gendering' organisations perspective to women on boards by moving beyond a 'body counting' starting point (Calás *et al.*, 2014; Martin, 2001); instead understanding organisations as gendering, and utilising practice and discourse based methodological perspectives to understand how gender is 'done' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or 'performed' (Butler, 1990). By looking at how concepts of the ideal board member, networking practices and sensemaking discourses are gendered, a broader understanding of how the process operates has been gained. It particularly highlights how individuals draw on gendered discourses to make sense of their identity, experience and practice on the route to the boardroom, and how individuals adopt these discourses during recruitment into organisations.

Finally, this research contributes to the emerging literature on gender and elites, revealing the value of understanding women seeking board roles as a gendered elite: a specific population who simultaneously negotiate privilege and disadvantage. This research shows how they establish credibility and legitimacy through the appointment process, a location where their privilege is contested and challenged (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a). This demonstrates their need to do 'gender well and differently' (ibid.) in order to be considered credible candidates. Their gender also intersects with elite status, where we see them using gendered language to emphasise their status in comparison to other women. More broadly, this research places directors in a wider social context as members of the corporate elite, offering empirical evidence for the informality, opacity and reliance on networks that the appointment process is frequently characterised by. This reveals the closure mechanisms at play in the corporate director 'elite', and how these are gendered.

This research has implications for the potential of policy and social change. The voluntary target set by Lord Davies' in 2011 saw rapid change in the number of women on boards in the UK, and the FTSE 100 matched the target of 25 per cent by 2015. This success is notable and praiseworthy, and from a body-counting perspective is significant – indeed the UK has gained success faster than many countries that have a legal quota (cf. Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). This research challenges some of the assumptions often implicit in this success however, by showing that the appointment process is still highly difficult for candidates to navigate, particularly those who do not have the same experience, appearance, fit or networks as those who are already on boards. This raises questions about the extent to which the target has led to boards seeking diverse candidates as a result of taking more women. It also highlights the reliance on networks and a difficult to navigate appointment process, which challenges the assumption that the appointment process has become more rigorous or open to wider candidates from different backgrounds (cf. Davies, 2015).

Most significantly, this research suggests that the success of the diversity target may have led to a backlash, as there emerged widespread insistence by many of the men in the study that it is easier for women, and that men are consequently at a disadvantage. During the period of time this research covered over 70 per cent of new board roles in the FTSE 350were given to men (Sealy *et al.*, 2016) challenging the existence of 'positive discrimination' or a bias towards women. This may have implications for women who have board roles, if they are required to defend their credibility and prove themselves within a hostile and critical environment (Seierstad, 2016). This also indicates that increased board diversity may not represent long-term change in attitude: the belief that it is 'easier for women' was largely connected to the target, rather than drawing on a business or social justice case for board diversity. This may suggest a lack of real commitment to gender equality, either by appointing boards or by the women who are being appointed.

Moving forward, this highlights the importance of reframing the board diversity debate around social justice arguments, and for practitioners, policy makers and academics to engage with critical analysis of the board appointment process. As Seierstad (2016) also notes in relation to the legal

gender quota in Norway, this research also highlights the importance of examining how this voluntary target affects the process and those individuals seeking roles, beyond simply increasing the number of women.

The thesis will proceed as follows. First, I will outline the extant literature relevant to the thesis, examining the women on boards initiative in context, and the need to conduct gendered research in this area. Next I will outline the research epistemology and methodology, before outlining the three research foci in turn. Finally I will address how these three themes can be brought together, to broaden our understandings of how women on boards can be located within wider contexts, and reflect on the power and influence of the women on boards agenda in the UK.

2. Gender and boards: a research agenda

The relatively few women who take up roles on corporate boards of directors has received unprecedented attention in the last five years, in academic literature, media outputs, and in wider societal discourse (De Anca and Gabaldon, 2014; Huse and Solberg 2006; Post and Byron, 2015; Seierstad and Opsahl, 2011; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015 Torchia *et al*. 2011). This is part of a wider imperative to address gender inequality: there is increasing space in popular culture, media and businesses given to discussing the persistence of inequalities, to the extent that gender inequality as often treated as seemingly self-evident (Gill and Orgad, 2015). This is also of increasing concern within workplaces and organisations: whilst in the UK men and women enter the workplace in equal numbers, the numbers of women in senior positions diminishes the further up the ladder they progress. While the number of women in elite and leader positions is rising in the UK, progress still remains relatively slow and women's experiences at this level remain under-researched (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a; 2016b).

This chapter will outline some of the extant literature on the experiences of women on boards and in senior roles, to demonstrate the need for more in-depth research into women's experiences at this level. It will show that while research on women on boards is expansive, it can be built on further by drawing it together with the wider literature on gender and organisations. It will also show the tendency to concentrate on demographic and 'body counting' analyses, noting the relatively few women on boards and making recommendations for how this can be remedied, or by building a business case for their appointment. While this has increased the number of women at senior levels, there is a need to build on the current literature in order to demonstrate that even where these perspectives highlight bias, they rarely challenge the underlying assumptions of how individuals are chosen for roles, or examine the discourses that constitute their experiences. A social constructionist perspective, which has been demonstrably useful for understanding gendered experiences in work and organisations, can be usefully brought to our understanding of women on boards.

The chapter will proceed as follows: first I will discuss the extant literature on women on boards, to outline one of the most common explanations for women's absence from boardrooms: the human capital explanation. I will then discuss current perspectives on how directors are chosen for roles, outlining the social capital explanation and the focus on gender and networks as an explanation for gender inequality. I will then discuss the wider theoretical literature on gender and organisations, to emphasise the value of moving from a gender and organisation based perspective to a *gendering* organisation perspective, and one that understands gender as fluid and constantly negotiated, rather than a static category for comparison. I will also outline some of the emerging literature on women in elite roles and accounts of corporate elites, to give the wider context of women on boards, and the unique position they hold as simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged. Finally, I will discuss women on boards in this wider context to determine the conceptual potential of viewing director appointments as an elite closure mechanism, and the value of utilising a gendered analysis of how it operates.

2.1. Gender and Corporate Boards

Corporate boards or boards of directors are a group of individuals that work at the top of organisations. Holding a director role on such boards is often seen as the crowning achievement for corporate leaders (Stern and Westphal, 2010; Sheridan *et al.*, 2015). The make-up and responsibilities of the board of directors varies from country to country according to national regulation and business law, but they can be broadly understood as a group of directors, who are 'collectively responsible for the long-term success of the company' (Financial Reporting Council, 2014: p. 7). The typical composition of such a board in the UK is two to four executive directors (Lowe *et al.*, 2016), most commonly the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Financial Officer (CFO), who are responsible for the day-to-day management of the organisation, and an equal or greater number of non-executive directors[1] who are responsible for monitoring the behaviour and decision-making of the executive directors. While executive roles are full time positions often taken by individuals who have worked up through a company or moved laterally from another, non-executive roles are seen as part-time, and often individuals will hold more than one role on a number of boards. Boards are overseen by the Chair[2], who is responsible for leadership of the board.

Women currently hold 12 per cent of corporate board roles globally (Deloitte, 2015), and just 4 per cent of Chair roles. The lack of women on boards has, in recent years, become widely regarded as an issue that countries and companies need to address. This gender imbalance is critiqued from two perspectives: a social justice perspective, and a utilitarian perspective or 'business case' (Huse, 2008; Seierstad et al., 2015; Seierstad, 2016). The social justice perspective draws attention to boards of directors as representing positions of significant power, and highlights the problems arising when

[1] In the United States, such people are frequently referred to as independent directors, while in the UK the preferred term is non-executive directors, although the roles are fairly interchangeable and the literature can be drawn on to apply to both contexts.

[2] Throughout the thesis I will use the term 'Chair' (capitalised) to refer to the leader of the board, although it is surprisingly common practice, particularly in the business and management literature, to refer to the leader of the board as the chairman, even when it is a woman. While there are often arguments made that it is used gender-neutrally to refer to a man or a woman (and, indeed, many women in this role refer to themselves as chairmen), I prefer to use Chair as the gender-neutral term.

this power is concentrated in a narrow demographic (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). From this perspective, the concentration of men on boards is representative of a legacy of historical gender inequalities, which need to be tackled in order to subvert male dominance (Acker, 1990; Bartky, 1990), and should therefore should be critiqued on the grounds of a lack of social fairness (Noon, 2007) or equality, both in wider society and in organisations.

More recently, a utilitarian perspective (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015) or 'business case' for women on boards has been put forward. This is present in academic research, but also commonly in corporate and practitioner research, arguing that having women on boards benefits companies: it can be linked to companies having better financial performance (Adams and Ferreira, 2009; Carter *et al.*, 2003; Curtis *et al.*, 2012; Grant Thornton International, 2015) and greater innovation (Miller and Triana, 2009; Torchia *et al.*, 2011). Psychological research into group behaviour and decision-making has been used to argue that diverse boards are more effective (Curtis *et al.*, 2012; Brown *et al.*, 2002; Nielsen and Huse, 2010) and make better decisions (Burke, 2000; Selby, 2001); similarly it is argued that boards lacking in diversity are associated with negative performance, a lack of critical thinking, and more chance of 'group-think' (Mattis, 2000; Singh *et al.*, 2000). Sensitivity to board gender diversity is also seen as an indicator of how responsive an organisation is towards wider social issues (Kelan, 2008; McCabe *et al.*, 2006)., This is corroborated by research that suggests there is a positive relationship between women on boards, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) ratings (Bear *et al.*, 2010), and workforce loyalty (Bilimoria, 2000; Bilimoria and Wheeler, 2000; Burgess and Theranou, 2002; Burke, 2000; Mattis, 1993; Powell, 1999). These perspectives are frequently put forward to emphasise the importance of addressing a lack of gender diversity on boards.

To tackle the lack of women on boards, many countries, such as Norway, Italy, Belgium, France, Spain, Iceland, The Netherlands and Malaysia have introduced legislative quotas (Teigen, 2012a; 2012b; Fagan *et al.*, 2012; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015), requiring a certain percentage of each gender

to sit on board roles, with legal action if companies do not meet the quota. These quotas have had varying degrees of success, dependent in part on how well legislated they are and how culturally committed to gender equality the country is (for an overview, see Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). In 2013 the European Union considered introducing quotas across the EU if countries did not increase the number of women on boards through their own measures (European Commission, 2013; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015), although this quota was not implemented at the time of writing.[3] Norway's quota has been widely regarded as the most successful: from 2005 the Norwegian government required all boards over a certain size to have at least 40% representation of both men and women. This was seen as starting a 'snowball' (Huse *et al.*, 2015), pushing other countries (particularly European countries) to acknowledge the lack of gender diversity on their boards, and explain how they would be tackling it. Some countries have resisted implementing quotas: the US and Canada have implemented no legislative changes or significant government intervention, although there are some discussions around the importance of board diversity, particularly from corporates and NGOs (McKinsey & Company, 2007; 2013; 2016; Seierstad and Opsahl, 2010).

The UK's approach to women on boards has been 'collaborative' (Seierstad and Opsahl, 2010): rather than setting a legal quota, voluntary targets were set and a 'comply or explain' model (Terjesen *et al.*, 2015) is used, with increased pressure on companies through non-legislative means: corporate institutional actors, individual actors, state (non-legislative) encouragement, and the media (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). Since 1999, researchers at Cranfield University have produced the 'Female FTSE' reports (Sealy *et al.*, 2007; 2008a; 2009; 2016; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012; 2013; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2010; 2014; 2015), tracking the progress of women into the Financial Times Stock Exchange (hereafter FTSE) 100 and FTSE 250[4] and 'naming and shaming' companies with little or no gender diversity (for an overview of the women on boards work produced by Cranfield University

[3] Most likely this will not be implemented at all now that the UK has voted to leave the EU.
[4] Combined, these make up the top 350 publicly listed companies in the UK. Which companies fall into each listing changes every three months, and while the lists fluctuate, the FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 can be conceptualised as distinct categories of companies.

see Sealy et al., 2017). In 2011 the government appointed Lord Davies to conduct an independent review into women on boards [sic.]; the first 'Women on Boards' report (Davies, 2011), commonly referred to as the Davies report, was launched in 2011, which called on FTSE 100 companies to meet a voluntary target of 25% for women's board representation by 2015. The UK also saw a wellspring of organisations such as the 30% Club, a group of Chairs of FTSE companies who declared their commitment to the issue, or directors associations and networks acting as pressure groups (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). In addition to pressuring companies to appoint women to their boards, the Davies report called attention to a lack of transparency in how directors are chosen for their roles. To address this, it called on executive search firms to contribute to the women on boards strategy, by recommending they draw up a voluntary code of conduct to ensure that where they were involved in board appointments, more gender-inclusive shortlists were provided (Doldor *et al.*, 2012; 2016), These combined factors have been a key driver for change (*ibid*.) and saw the number of women on FTSE 100 boards rise from 12.5 per cent in 2011 (135 directors) to 25 per cent (286) in 2015 (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2015).

The UK response to the women on boards agenda was notable for two key reasons. First, was it being largely business led: Lord Davies previously worked in a major bank and is a Chairman on a number of FTSE boards; the 30% Club was founded by Helena Morrissey, a well-known CEO of an investment management company,[5] and the academics at Cranfield University who published the women on boards reports also had key ties with both Lord Davies and Helena Morrissey, and UK businesses. The integration of headhunters also built on this, as it made appointing women a commercial imperative for them too (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009; Doldor *et al.*, 2016). The Davies review required search firms to sign up to a code of conduct, outlining best practice in relation to search criteria and search processes, as a way to engender board diversity. As well as directly

[5] To highlight the interconnectedness between the key actors in the women on boards agenda: at the final women on boards report launch under Lord Davies' leadership, Lord Davies introduced Helena Morrissey by stating that he had had 'more dinners with her than with his own wife'.

connecting board diversity to a more transparent appointment process (as discussed later in this chapter) this cast headhunters – a profession renowned for their opacity and closed networks (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009) – as key drivers for change.

Unlike in Norway, where much of the debate centred on social justice reasoning for board diversity (Seirstad *et al.*, 2015; Seierstad, 2016), the UK response has drawn primarily on the business case and been driven by business. The Davies report, Female FTSE reports and the wider discussion in the business media have emphasised the business case throughout the campaign, and focused on how women will benefit the appointing board and companies. The Davies report, for instance, stated that:

> There is a strong business case for balanced boards. Inclusive and diverse boards are more likely to be effective boards, better able to understand their customers and stakeholders and to benefit from fresh perspectives, new ideas, vigorous challenge and broad experience. This in turn leads to better decision-making. (Davies, 2011: p. 7)

It is notable that the aspects referred to (understanding stakeholders, bringing fresh perspectives and so forth) draw on the business case to advocate the appointment of women on boards due to a taken-for-granted relationship between the presence of women and good governance/firm performance. Similarly, in the Female FTSE report in December 2015, which marked the end of Lord Davies leading the women on boards strategy, he argued that the UK's approach was a 'unique and innovative response, which perfectly illustrates the voluntary *business-led* approach in action' (Davies, 2015, p. 15, my emphasis). Thus, equality, social justice or critical standpoints that would be expected to play a role in feminist or sociological academic research are side-lined in favour of utilitarian, business-focused arguments (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015).

There is therefore a paradox inherent in the UK case, where a social justice issue was cast as a business imperative, and gender equality issue taken on actors that are not involved with a social

justice case, or hold an activist role. This paradox was found in Doldor and colleagues (2016) research into the role of headhunters in the change, finding that they drew on two competing logics: that of themselves as voluntarily contributing to change, while referring to the 'institutional pressures created by the Davies report and the EU quota threat, and the commercial opportunities created by more interest for female candidates among clients' to justify their involvement (Doldor *et al.*, 2016, p.292). In interviews with search consultants they emphasised a need to change their practice in order to meet the needs of the Davies review, 'justifying their practices by vaguely customising the business case logic outlined in the report with caveats and rationales specific to their profession' *ibid.*, p. 293). They therefore became unwitting (and, perhaps, unwilling) change agents, despite not having a pre-existing commitment to diversity.

A second aspect that makes the UK context interesting as a topic of study is the speed at which numerical success was achieved; the Female FTSE reports and the target were deemed a resounding success (Davies, 2015) due to their engendering a rapid increase in the number of women now holding roles on UK boards. Indeed, the researchers at Cranfield University that worked on the Female FTSE reports that were a crucial part of the Davies review state that it is 'credited as the world's most successful voluntary WoB [sic] initiative, achieving a doubling of women board directors in only five years' (Sealy *et al.*, 2017). From a body-counting perspective this can be treated as accomplishment; however, there has, throughout the process, been very little critical feminist engagement with the women on boards agenda in the UK. The academic work in this area in the UK has also been dominated by a relatively small number of academics (Sealy *et al.*, 2017) (or 'opportunistic researchers', according to Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). Although they have been instrumental in driving the initiative to get more women appointed to boards, several also hold roles within the corporate elite themselves (Gaughan, 2014; Bushell, 2015; Sealy *et al.*, 2015; 2014) and have been less able to (Sealy *et al.*, 2017) (or, arguably, less inclined to) critique said elite. Furthermore, because of the relative speed that women have been appointed (and the relationship drawn at the beginning between

homogenous appointments and a biased process), there is now an underlying presumption that the presence of women is evidence of change, to the detriment of critiques of the appointment process.

Moving beyond a body-counting or business case perspective on women on boards, understanding it within a wider context, and using a feminist critical analysis of the process can engender a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and experiences of women on boards, particularly through understanding both gender and privilege as socially constructed. Such research is needed, not only to understand why women might still face barriers getting into the boardroom but also to understand women on boards as a population within a wider 'wealth elite', and as a particular class in society.

2.2. Gender and boards research

To better understand gender and boards and the 'women on boards' agenda in terms of how directors are appointed and what cultures of work occur in this population, it is valuable to examine the relevant extant literature, and what is already known about their experiences and how they are appointed.

2.2.1. Human capital of women on boards

One key area of research into women on boards has looked at the career backgrounds, experience and qualifications of women directors in comparison to men's. This perspective frequently presumes there is a human capital (Becker, 1964) or 'individual deficit' explanation (Gutek, 1994) for women's absence: women are not appointed to boards because they lack the necessary experience, qualifications or skills desired for board positions (Burke, 2000; Bushell, 2015; Hillman and Dalziel, 2003; Nicholson and Kiel, 2004; Izraeli and Talmud, 1999; Withers, 2012). By inference, the solution offered is that, provided women can get the right experience or skills, they will be appointed. This perspective implicitly views board appointments as a rational and meritocratic process, where the criteria for directors are set by the needs of the board, and the best person for that role will be selected.

A key factor in this argument has been put forward through research that demonstrates boards have a preference for directors with previous board experience (Ahern and Dittmar, 2012; Davies, 2011; Doldor *et al.*, 2012), either as executive directors[6] or non-executive directors (Brickley *et al.*, 1999; Fahlenbrach *et al.*, 2010; Fich and White, 2005; Zorn, 2004). The wider corporate governance literature also supports this: it argues that as directors are responsible for making strategic decisions for the organisation (Haunschild, 1993; Hill, 1995; Johnson *et al.*, 1996; Useem *et al.*, 1993), they must demonstrate competence in this area by having previously been a director, or holding high-level senior business experience (Sealy and Doherty, 2012; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005; Sheridan *et al.*, 2015). This is seen as a significant barrier for women, as there are relatively few who have been in

[6] The inference being that individuals, having held an executive director role on one board, will also or later take up a non-executive role on another.

these roles or have significant board experience (Sealy *et al.*, 2007; 2008a; 2009; 2016; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012; 2013; Vinnecombe *et al.*, 2010; 2014; 2015).

Despite the focus on previous board experience, there is little evidence that ex-directors are more effective than directors from other backgrounds, and it is argued that their value is symbolic or reputational (Fahlenbrach *et al.*, 2010). Fahlenbrach and colleagues (2010) posit a certification hypothesis: because CEOs are perceived as highly desired and therefore able to have their 'pick of boards', their choice of a particular board offers symbolic indication that the company is doing well (*ibid*.). Similarly, Gaughan (2013) argues that previous board experience acts as an indicator to the appointing board that the candidate is not 'risky'. She argues that candidates need 'reputational capital' (she conceptualises this as a blend of human, social and cultural capital, although her analysis foregrounds previous board experience) to counteract the presumed 'liability of newness' (Kor and Misangyi, 2008).

While a preference for previous board experience could explain a preference for men over women (as they are more likely to have held such roles), there is evidence to suggest that the certification of previous board experience is more important for women than men. Hillman and colleagues (2002) found that women are more likely than men to join subsequent boards after their first appointment; similarly, Hawarden and Marsland (2011) found that 'women and minorities with two [board] seats join subsequent boards at a faster rate than do white males' (Hawarden and Marsland, 2011, p. 536). They conclude that networks of directors 'adapt to the pressure to add more female and minority directors by adding them faster than white males, *once they already have substantive board experience*' (Hawarden and Masland, 2011, p. 536, my emphasis; see also Hawarden, 2010). When women do have C-suite roles, there is also evidence to suggest that they are less likely to gain prestige associated with these top roles (Zelechowski and Bilimora, 2004), or are more likely to be in precarious or risky positions (Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014; Ryan and Haslam, 2005) that may also be less favoured by appointing boards.

Certain career experiences and industry backgrounds have also been more strongly connected with board roles, and this may contribute to gendered differences. Industries with a greater proportion of women employees and/or greater direct proximity to consumers (such as professional services; marketing; retail; healthcare and media) tend to have more women on their boards (Sealy *et al.*, 2007; 2008a; 2009; 2016; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012; 2013; Vinnecombe *et al.*, 2010; 2014; 2015; Lowe *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, companies in gender-imbalanced industries such as construction, technology or blue-chip have relatively few women in board roles (*ibid*., see also: Joy 2008; Brammer *et al.*, 2007; Hillman *et al.*, 2007; Sealy *et al.*, 2007). This vertical segregation may be due to companies' preference for directors that have relevant industry experience (FRC, 2014; Kor and Misangyi, 2008). However, as Holgersson (2012) notes, boards are also biased towards areas of senior management that men are more likely to hold, such as technology or finance (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2013; cf. Sealy and Doherty, 2011), over women who held *functionally identical roles* in different areas of management (Holgersson, 2012: p. 458). This again presents a problem to the human capital explanation, and suggests gender bias is more complicated than simply women not being qualified to be on boards; rather, even women with the relevant experience may be treated differently.

Partly due to requirements of the UK Corporate Governance Code (FRC 2014; 2016) and an increased focus on regulation and risk since the 2008 financial crisis, financial backgrounds and qualifications are increasingly desirable to boards (Lowe *et al.*, 2015; 2016; Roberts, 2015; Sealy and Doherty, 2012; Zorn, 2004). Sealy and Doherty (2012) found that, of the women appointed to FTSE 100 board positions in 2012, 57 per cent came from a financial background or held financial qualifications and conclude that finance can be a 'springboard' for women into board positions (Sealy and Doherty, 2012). Due to the small sample size (57 per cent here is just 27 women) a causal connection cannot necessarily be inferred, although it may suggest a preference for candidates with financial backgrounds. There is no evidence that financial qualifications are more valuable for women than men; however, given the gender segregation that occurs within financial industries and the

relatively few women who make it to very senior roles, a preference for financial backgrounds may disproportionality benefit men.

As with other kinds of experience however, there is some evidence to suggest that this experience is not attributed or used in a neutral way, and too comes with gendered patterns and effects. A key facet of the business case for women on boards (as discussed earlier) related to the wider social discourses around the financial crisis: in the years post-2008 there emerged a 'women-as-saviours' narrative (Roberts, 2015) arguing that women from financial backgrounds were required on boards to moderate the excessively risky and testosterone-driven behaviour of men (McDowell, 2011; Sealy and Doherty, 2012; Seierstad, 2016). It is notable, therefore (although not discussed in the research) that contradictory findings emerged. Sealy and Doherty (2012) argue that:

> Female board members felt [financial qualifications] gave them credibility to be perceived as *not so different from the men,* enabling them to be judged in the same terms, giving them perceived legitimacy and a common language. Finance was described as the language of the board and having it gave women access to the conversation. The language of finance also helps to break down some persistent stereotypes about women's competence and emotional nature. (Sealy and Doherty, 2012: p. 6, my emphasis)

From this perspective, women are encouraged to demonstrate their qualification for the boardroom by accentuating their *similarities* with men rather than their differences (Noon, 2007), and by deliberately challenging women's presumed 'emotional nature'. Roberts similarly notes the dissonance between the 'women as saviours' narrative and the 'women as (gender-neutral) talent' narrative; the former portrays the boardroom as a masculine, testosterone-heavy space, while the latter portrays it neutrally, again problematising the human capital explanation and highlighting the inconsistencies in research in this area.

Another common finding by women on boards research is the assertion that women directors are 'over-qualified': they hold higher formal managerial or academic qualifications than men on the same boards (González Menéndez *et al.*, 2012; Peterson and Philpot, 2007; Sheridan *et al.*, 2015; Singh *et al.*, 2008; Terjesen *et al.*, 2008). Singh and colleagues (2008) studied multiple human capital dimensions of new directors in the FTSE 100 and found that women were more likely to have advanced degrees, MBAs, and international experience, a finding echoed in other research (Burgess and Theranou, 2000; 2002; Hillman *et al.*, 2000; 2002; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005; Sheridan *et al.*, 2015).

The problem with both the human capital explanation for women's absence from boards and those studies that argue women are 'over-qualified' is that they do not interrogate the presumption that having the right or wrong experience affects how directors are chosen, or examine how this occurs or informs the appointment process. Much of the research that either supports or refutes the human capital explanation (see for example Burke, 2000; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009; Sing *et al.*, 2008; Hillman *et al.*, 2007) does not explain how lacking the right experience results in women being excluded. Mattis (2000) cites a 1993 Catalyst survey wherein CEOs stated their reluctance to appoint women due to a belief that they are 'unqualified' (Mattis, 2000; see also Burke, 1997). Bushell (2015) states that 'CEOs and headhunters frequently cite lack of human capital as a reason for not selecting women board members', citing Davies-Netzley (1998) and Theranou (1999), neither of which come to that conclusion. In a more recent research review, Gabaldon and colleagues (2016) similarly state that 'board selectors usually assume women lack the adequate expertise or knowledge' (2016, p. 372) but similarly have no empirical references. While women's 'over-qualification' can be demonstrated empirically, it is not clear how this is relevant to the appointment process.

This shortcoming is largely due to the limitations of the methodology used in such studies. The majority of research into women on boards draws on publicly-available data (such as directors' CVs) rather than primary sources, and only examines women who have already been successful. This

results in the human capital explanation ('women are not qualified') being used as a 'straw person', which is counteracted by status characteristics theory ('women are *over*-qualified'). Both of these explanations assume that the board appointment process is rational and meritocratic (Hillman *et al.*, 2000; Hillman and Dalziel, 2003; Johnson *et al.*, 1996; Withers *et al.*, 2012). It is presumed *a priori* that boards will appoint or reject a candidate according to their experience, and gender is treated as an individual trait or a 'carrier variable' (Unger and Crawford, 1992) that correlates with differences in experience (Izraeli and Talmud, 1999), or that results in women requiring differing proof for their qualification.

This is further problematised by there being no clear definition of what experience, skills and competencies are needed for boards (Bushell, 2015), either in the UK or globally (Zattoni and Cuomo, 2010). While financial backgrounds and previous board experience are most common, a great number of directors are appointed who do not meet these criteria. In a review of global corporate governance codes, Zattoni and Cuomo (2010) concluded that there was little consensus as to what skills and experience are needed by directors, and it was generally presumed that boards would recruit a relevant mix of skills, ensuring balance across the board members, while ensuring a fit with the specific needs of the company. Further, a number of studies have argued that boards choose directors according to the specific needs of the company at the time; if the firm is struggling or undergoing a process of great change or merge then the board may be likely to appoint someone with specific, relevant experience; they may be asked to bring in the CEO of another company, or of someone with specific relevant experience (Withers *et al.*, 2012), in a similar way to the recent focus on financial backgrounds since the financial crisis (Sealy and Doherty, 2012). This again highlights the importance of understanding wider social discourses and how they influence which directors may be more desired than others, rather than the criteria representing a typical job role description that may be seen within organisational hiring procedures (Withers, 2010).

One exception to the methodological limitations in women on boards research comes from Holgersson's (2012) study into the appointment of managing directors in Sweden, which offers an empirical example of how boards hold women to different standards than men when choosing their directors. Holgersson interviewed Chairs[7] during the appointment of managing directors, and found that often where men lacked a skill or experience that the Chair had previously specified as essential, they would more commonly state that the man could learn it 'on the job', where for women it would be used as a reason for rejection (Holgersson, 2012). This provides an example of how women and men can be held to differing standards. Most crucially however, it demonstrates how these enactments of bias can occur without disrupting the Chairs' assertions that they are committed to gender equality (cf. Kelan, 2014). This allows them to justify their decision to choose a man without troubling the notion that they are operating fairly and rationally. Although it is not explored in-depth in her work, this hints at how the emphasis on having the 'right' experience can be utilised *within* the appointment process to accept or reject a potential candidate. This kind of gendered analysis has not been readily applied to non-executive director appointments, or in the UK context, but has potential for building on the current research into women's qualification for boards, and understanding the process using qualitative methods.

2.2.2. Fit with the board

Another explanation offered for a lack of gender diversity on boards is the assertion that aspirant directors are judged by how they 'fit' with the current board (Hill, 1995; Pye, 2000; 2001; 2005), and this is presumed to make it difficult for women to access board roles due to boards being majority men. A report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into how directors in the UK are appointed concluded that often appointing board members use their 'gut instincts' to judge candidates' potential value, assessing how the individual would fit with the 'values, norms and behaviours of existing board members' (Doldor *et al.*, 2012: p. iv). The authors argue that this reliance on 'fit' inevitably excludes women, as boards are gender-imbalanced environments that women are

[7] Chairs are frequently the primary gatekeepers for roles, as will be explored later in the chapter.

less likely to fit into (Doldor *et al*, 2012; see also Pye, 2002; Sealy and Doherty, 2012). It should be noted that although research demonstrates assessment by fit with the board, these studies often take the difference between men and women as a given, presuming that because judgment is on fit and boards are majority men, women will find it difficult to fit in or demonstrate fit.

While the notion of fit is often less well operationalised in the gender and boards literature, the importance of 'fit' in demonstrating competence also emerges in empirical research into search firms. Ethnographic research into headhunting firms has demonstrated that subjectivity is an 'inexorable element of the search process, regardless of the sophistication or objectivity of measures in place' (Wirz, 2014: p. 8); headhunters in Wirz's study stated that their role (supporting clients in seeking candidates for senior roles) is often made difficult when the clients state "I don't know what I am looking for, but I'll know when I find him" [sic] (Wirz, 2014: p. 7). Which candidate is preferred can rely heavily on their interactions with the Chair; it is also highly telling that the search consultant in this extract refers, unequivocally, to a man. In relation to appearance, Meriläinen and colleagues (2013) find that this assessment is also bound up in embodied assumptions: an individual's potential to fill positions was often judged using embodied capability measures; physical fitness, voice and appearance, which disadvantages women and men who do not fit this 'ideal'.

While boards' assessment of candidates according to their personal characteristics, leadership qualities and 'fit' may explain the absence of women, the governance literature also suggests that 'fit' may be an explicit requirement for candidates to be good directors (Sheridan *et al.*, 2011). McGregor (2000) argues that boards require a skills *mix* in order to be effective, and are less concerned with the traits of individual directors. Similarly, Hill (1995) found that directors feel that 'consensus' is an important aspect of board discussions, viewing the boards they sat on as 'unitary bodies, small teams […] working together on a consensual basis, with collective responsibility for the direction of the organization' (Hill, 1995: p. 256). There is also research to suggest that 'fit' is not just assessed in relation to the specific board being joined; Gaughan (2011) suggests that when it comes to FTSE 100

board appointments candidates are regarded as entering the ranks of a corporate elite, and thus need to have cultural fit with the norms and values of its other members, to ensure they do not pose a potential risk to the boards reputation. In terms of addressing gender bias in the process, this is problematic, as it suggests that assessing candidates' 'fit' with the board is not necessarily incongruous with a belief that the process is meritocratic.

2.2.3. The right personality

The broader corporate governance literature suggests that directors' assessment is often based on subjective and personal criteria, as the role is seen to require certain personality types and interpersonal skills. Research has highlighted that directors are seen to require excellent communication skills and leadership qualities (Burke, 1997; Tricker and Lee, 1997; Vinnicombe and Singh, 2003); intellectual ability; good judgment; a high level of integrity; analytical thinking; and the ability to be constructive, collaborative and diplomatic (Hillmer, 1998; Korn/Ferry, 2012). Although many of these traits are expected in senior roles, directors' traits are often described as qualitatively different to those required to be in management or other leadership roles, where the emphasis might be placed on being inspirational and visionary (Eagly and Karau, 2002, House *et al.*, 2004; McCauley, 2004; Vinkenburg *et al.*, 2011) and on high-level decision-making and strategic thinking (Tricker and Lee, 1997). This is felt by directors, too: when asked what made them suitable for the role, recently appointed female directors frequently cited their communication skills, leadership qualities and fit with the board (Sheridan and Milgate, 2005). This legitimates a focus on board members' personal characteristics, traits and social skills (Stern and Westphal, 2010), which may disadvantage women; Westphal and Stern (2007) argue that directors can negotiate this and gain positions through tactics such as flattery, opinion conformity and favour rendering (Westphal and Stern, 2006; 2007; Westphal, 1998), but that these practices are more beneficial for (white) men than for groups with lower status.

This may suggest an area where women may have to work harder to be seen as credible candidates, as their leadership styles are frequently assessed differently. This may be a problem for women board members as it is often argued that men and women's leadership styles, voice and presentation of self are all held to different (and often higher) standards than men (Wajcman, 1999; Rutherford, 2001). They also have greater difficulty demonstrating 'executive presence' (Hewlett, 2013), something crucial for gaining senior positions and board roles. On the other hand, there is an opposing wealth of research to suggest that women's leadership styles are increasingly more valued by organisations, being more collaborative, transformational and effective (Eagly, 2007).

The emphasis placed on directors' independence and influence also affects the kind of personality that is presumed to be required. The role of the director has traditionally been centred around the protection of shareholder interests, and they are seen to provide independent control over the management on behalf of shareholders (Fama, 1980; Hillman and Dalziel, 2003; van de Walt and Ingley, 2003; Westphal and Graebner, 2009; Westphal and Milton, 2000). This frames the director role in terms of the 'agency logic of governance' (Westphal, 2010), wherein the management or executive directors are seen to be motivated by strategic agendas and their own self-interest, and the role of the non-executive directors is to exercise control over such motivations and ensure the company is operating in the best interests of the shareholders (i.e. their profit is protected). They must therefore also be able to challenge and influence the executive directors (Stevenson and Radin, 2009), and board decision-making (Pye, 2002; Westphal, 1996; 1999; Zajac and Westphal, 1996).

Again it is assumed that this is an area that might disadvantage women, due to their (presumably) having less influence over the executives. Research suggests that women are expected to be less influential when they do join the board as 'out group' members (i.e. women) in male spaces (Carter *et al.*, 2010; Westphal and Milton, 2000; Zhu *et al.*, 2014). It has been suggested also that individuals with minority status, such as women or ethnic minorities, have to work harder to achieve influence in the boardroom (Westphal and Stern 2007). The extent to which women can influence

other directors and move beyond being 'tokens' (Kanter, 1977) is also dependent on the number and ratio of women on the boards: Torchia and colleagues (2011) found that the positive effect of appointing women to the board in terms of their contribution to firm value was only present in boards that had three or more women on the board (Torchia *et al.*, 2011)

Although it has not been readily included in the gender and boards literature, these explanations for women's exclusion from board roles are supported by research on gender and organisation, which point to the intrinsically masculine nature of organisations, and how they implicitly exclude women, particularly at senior levels (Acker, 1990; 1992; Kanter, 1977; Cockburn, 1991). It is well established in this field that senior positions of power and influence in business and corporate life are 'masculinised', in that they tend to be constructed around male norms (Mavin *et al.*, 2014). Women in senior or elite roles therefore face a 'double bind', due to their occupying a space where they have to perform the role of the elite leader (who is inherently masculine) (Gherardi, 1994; Maddock and Parkin, 1994) while meeting contradictory expectations related to notions of (respectable) femininity (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a; 2016b; Mavin *et al.*, 2014). Research has highlighted how women leaders have to work to ensure credibility and respectability via their appearance, through adherence to rules that are ambiguous, complex and contradictory (Kelan, 2013). Their place in leadership roles is influenced by expectations of what is deemed respectable: 'what should be worn, what mannerisms, demeano[u]r, voice, size and shape are appropriate' (Sinclair, 2011: p. 119). This, Mavin and colleagues argue, means that women need to do gender 'well' (through performing femininity) while also doing gender 'differently' (performing masculinity) (Mavin and Grandy, 2013; 2016a; 2016b; Mavin *et al.*, 2014). While this has been noted in the experiences of women in senior roles, it has not been explicitly adopted in the women on boards literature, or connected with the specificities of the director role.

The extant research into women on boards has presented a number of explanations for why women may be excluded from boards of directors. It shows that there are differences in men and

women's levels of business experience, which is presumed to result in a preference for men, as they are more likely to possess senior business experience. A substantial proportion of the women on boards literature has taken this as its starting point (see for example Terjesen *et al.*, 2009; Gabaldon *et al.*, 2016) as it provides an important connection to wider research on gender and organisation: the barriers facing women getting to the top of organisations result in relatively few women with senior business experience, meaning there are too few women with the right experience to be chosen for boards. Research also suggests that men may more easily demonstrate the personal traits associated with director roles and be more desired by boards; thy may also be more likely to 'fit' with the board.

Although these studies provide a starting point for understanding women on boards, they suffer from two significant issues. The first is methodological: the majority draw on publicly-available data in the case of the human capital explanation, or wider theoretical work in the case of the right personality or fit with the board; in both cases the research is not explicitly designed to illuminate how these factors are enacted in practice. Second, all three explanations exclusively focus on how competence is defined through the process of appointment, and lead to the presumption that men and women are judged differently. This is therefore limited in its scope, as it implicitly treats the appointment process as rational or neutral, even while identifying its bias. Understanding how individuals make sense of the experience of seeking roles and how they draw on their experience, personal traits and fit with the board therefore offers a way to build on this research.

2.3. The board appointment process

In examining how the individual experience and characteristics of board directors influence how they are chosen, there is little support for a rational model of board appointments where the most qualified people will gain board positions. This suggests instead that there are biases in how board members are recruited, how they are sought out and who is ultimately chosen, which may make men more likely to be selected. (Bushell, 2015; Doldor *et al.*, 2012; Holton, 2000; Withers *et al.*, 2012)., Director appointments are characterised by an opaque appointment process which relies highly on recommendations, personal networks and reputation (Doldor *et al.*, 2012; EHRC, 2016; Gaughan, 2013). This is presumed to disadvantage women because of their differing networks and networking activities, and it is often taken for granted that a more rigorous or formal process of appointment would improve gender balance on boards (Davies, 2011; Doldor *et al.*, 2012).

The UK Corporate Governance Code (Financial Reporting Council, 2014; 2016) states that companies should be transparent in their board appointment processes, either by publicly advertising roles or using executive search firms/headhunters.[8] This is presumed to encourage companies to address bias in selection, to encourage rigour and objectivity in the process, and prevent them from appointing people already known to the board (Gabaldon *et al.*, 2015); however, the vast majority of corporate board-level roles are not publicly advertised (Lowe *et al.*, 2016) – including all of the FTSE 350 (EHRC, 2016). This does not look set to change: in the EHRC research, boards often stated that public advertising would be inappropriate due to board-level recruitment being a sensitive subject and potentially affecting company share price (Lowe *et al.*, 2016), again relating to the symbolic value directors have.

[8] In general, 'executive search firm' refers to the organisation, while 'headhunters' refers to the individuals that work in an executive search firm; however, the terms are largely interchangeable in the literature (c.f. Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009).

The corporate governance literature has acknowledged and criticised the opacity of the director appointment process (Adams *et al.*, 2010; Finkelstein *et al.*, 2009; Hermalin and Weisback, 1988; Johansson and Huse, 2000; Withers *et al.*, 2012). This is out of concern for the demographics and diversity levels of boards (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; Doldor *et al.*, 2012); because it is assumed that the selection of directors will affect board effectiveness (Adams *et al.*, 2010; Hermalin and Weisbach, 1988); or because of concerns regarding director independence (Grant Thornton, 2015). Historically directors were chosen by the Chair (Withers *et al.*, 2012); however, there have been moves to make the process more rigorous in recent years through the increased use of nomination committees and headhunters to find candidates, both of which are recommended by the UK Corporate Governance Code (FRC, 2016).[9]

The nominations committee (a sub-committee of the board responsible for identifying and nominating candidates for board positions) (Hoskisson *et al.*, 2009; Monks and Minow, 2004; Ruigrok, 2006; 2007) is presumed to have a positive effect on board diversity, by applying greater scrutiny to the appointment process; ensuring that it is as rigorous and fair as possible (Ruigrok 2006; 2007); opening up the process to a wider range of candidates; reducing the influence of the CEO (Westphal and Stern, 2007); and preventing them or the Chairs from handpicking candidates from their own personal networks (Doldor *et al.*, 2012; Eminet and Guedri, 2010). There is some evidence to suggest that the diversity of the nominations committee can make a difference to board appointments: Kaczmarek and colleagues (2012) argue that the composition of nominations committees 'represents the first and most important antecedent of diversity in the boardroom' (2012: p. 475), and that the presence of women on the nominations committee has a positive effect on the

[9] Once the director has been identified and chosen, they are 'formally' nominated and put forward to be voted upon by the shareholders (Johnson *et al.*, 1996; Monks and Minnow, 2004); while hypothetically they could then be voted against, only one candidate is put forward and it is very rare for them to not be selected at this stage (Hillman *et al.*, 2011). For this reason, often the appointment process is synonymous with gaining visibility with the appointing board and being selected by the Chair or nominations committee. As pointed out by Withers *et al.* (2012), this means that the identification, screening and selection processes are the most significant for understanding how directors are appointed, and why these processes may exclude women.

level of gender diversity. However, contradictory research found that whilst boards with diverse nominations committees were more likely to have independent and/or foreign directors, they were no more likely to appoint female directors (Ruigrok *et al.*, 2007). Overall there is little evidence that nominations committees work in practice, and responsibility for the appointments often rests with the Chair of the board overall (Lowe *et al.*, 2016).

Once a vacancy has been identified, the appointing board (officially the nominations committee, but often the Chair) will draw up a shortlist of potential candidates, often by working with or delegating to an executive search firm or headhunter (Arfken *et al.*, 2004; Bushell, 2015; Doldor *et al.*, 2012; Tienari *et al.*, 2013). Due to the confidentiality surrounding the head hunting industry it is difficult to get an accurate picture (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009), but in 2011 73 per cent of FTSE 100 companies, 60 per cent of FTSE 250 companies (Sealy *et al.*, 2011), and 48 per cent of FTSE 350 companies in 2016 (Lowe *et al.*, 2016) reported using search firms for their board appointments. Search firms were also a key part of the women on boards agenda and therefore their usage has increased in line with a need to get more women candidates for clients (Doldor et al., 2016; Lowe et al., 2016).

The primary role of the search firm is the finding and mapping of potential clients (Doldor *et al.*, 2012; 2016): they have access to wide databases of potential candidates, and are seen to offer a more rigorous approach than the appointing board contacting people through their own networks. This is presumed to make the process more professional, rigorous and meritocratic (Khurana, 2002; Tienari *et al.*, 2013, Wirz, 2014a; 2014b), which in turn is presumed to promote the appointment of women by neutralising gender bias in the process. After the recommendations made in the Davies report (Davies, 2011) that search firms should and can support gender balanced boards, they were also encouraged to 'extend their search processes to look deeper and wider into the female talent pool' (Davies, 2015: p. 16), and in some ways became what Doldor and colleagues call 'accidental activists' (Doldor *et al.*, 2016): key drivers for change in the women on boards space. This had two

key consequences: first, it required search firms to address issues inherent in their practice. They were required to sign up to a code of conduct, stating that they would articulate and commit to best practice in relation to search criteria processes around board appointments (*ibid*.,). Second, it directly connected the lack of women on board to the opaque process of appointments, with the inference that the use of headhunters (who signed up to the code of conduct and commit to more transparent appointment processes) can be an instigator of change. Despite these expectations, there is little empirical evidence that the use of search firms makes the appointment process more rigorous, or that this will necessarily lead to the appointment of more women (Doldor *et al*., 2012; 2016).

The problem with search firms as a driver for change is that the process of executive search is highly prone to gendered practices: it primarily involves white men as headhunters, clients and candidates (Boussebaa and Faulconbridge, 2016; Merilainen *et al*., 2013; Dreher *et al*., 2011; Faulconbridge *et al*., 2009; 2015), and typically enforces homogeneity in board appointments through targeting narrow pools of potential candidates (Khurana, 2002). In ethnographic research into the work of search firms, Wirz (2014a; 2014b) found many occasions where women were being put forward for roles to satisfy a gender target, while the headhunter was aware that the candidate would be rejected because their 'calibre' was not what the client had asked for. From the supply side, Dreher *et al*. (2011) found that white men were more likely than (white) women to be contacted by executive search firms, and this was also highlighted by research conducted for this project: conducting a survey of aspirant non-executive directors, we found that women were less likely to be contacted by search firms, and when they did have contact with them, were more likely to be offered advice rather than roles (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

The databases[10] that headhunters maintain and use as sources of potential candidates are also

[10] The database is also interesting in terms of maintaining search firms' place in the labour market. While historically it would be understandably impossible for a board to gain quick access to a list of potential candidates for a role, making the role of the search firm more significant, changes such as the internet, increased use of LinkedIn, and the sheer speed with which individuals can be introduced to each other through email could, hypothetically, be presumed to allow for a democratization of the process and for boards to (much

problematic: their purportedly rigorous methodology suggests that the process is 'open' and meritocratic, but the databases are created, maintained and updated by the headhunters, making (often highly subjective) judgments regarding candidates' competence. This assessment of competence is necessarily affected by gender biases similar to those examined earlier in the chapter: research into search practices demonstrates how firms rely on specific and narrow kinds of experience, personality traits that may be more easily demonstrated by men, and an overreliance on fit with the board (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009; 2015; Wirz, 2014a; 2014b).

There is also evidence to suggest that headhunters tend to rely on their own networks to source candidates. Faulconbridge and colleagues (2009; 2015), in their research into search firms conclude that they maintain and reproduce hierarchical, restrictive network practices that are reminiscent of the 'exclusive and powerful elite networks of labour recruitment of the past' (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009: p. 801). The difference is that, rather than being drawn from the Old Boys' networks of the past which were related to educational institutions (Wirz, 2014a, p.27) or the old 'gentlemanly capitalism' of the City of London (Sealy *et al.*, 2009), these networks comprise a new global elite who dominate in labour markets (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009: p. 806).As Faulconbridge and colleagues point out, these new networks may include women and those from international or global backgrounds, but still hold many of the 'class and social status markers' of the previous Old Boys' networks (cf. Savage *et al.*, 2015). Given that search firms need to sell their profession (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009), this results in a need to simultaneously sell their allegedly rigorous methodology and the power of their database, critique the Old Boys' networks for their alleged inefficiencies and inability to recruit the best talent, while still using their own networks to find candidates.

Overall, research into the director appointment process highlights its opacity and lack of rigour (Tienari *et al.*, 2013; Withers *et al.*, 2012), although this is often stated in relation to what is

more rigorously) conduct their own searches. To address this, search firms have discursively cast the internet as a potential source of 'information overload' that makes board recruitment more difficult (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009; 2015). Search firms therefore have to draw on discourses that present their work as 'painstaking' or as needing a great deal of time and skill.

unknown, rather than what is known; the absence of research and findings, rather than the existence of critical analysis. Evidence of increasing rigour in the process is also presumed, rather than demonstrated: qualitative research found that Chairs of FTSE 100 boards in the UK generally feel that the appointment process is becoming more rigorous and objective, moving towards a greater focus on skills, competencies and experience (Doldor *et al.*, 2012; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2010), and this is presumed to lead to more diverse appointments (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2010). Search firms were also required – and argue that they did – move towards an appointment process that is more rigorous and based on skills, opening up to a broader range of candidates (Doldor *et al.*, 2016). However, the research that connects this with the appointment process has been notably absent, with the majority of research drawing inferences about the appointment process by studying those who have been successful. There is also a presumed (but empirically unproven) relationship between rigorous appointments and board diversity.

Most challengingly here is also research to suggest that this is seen as a necessary part of the process. In her research into the appointment of FTSE 100 board directors, Gaughan found that board candidates justify the need for an opaque and lengthy appointment process in order to protect the reputations of the Chair and the company (Gaughan, 2013). She argues that as information about director appointments is highly sensitive, NEDs and Chairs are prepared to engage in processes that are opaque and ambiguous. As she concludes (frustratingly uncritically), 'this may go some way to explaining why the process of appointment [is] flawed, opaque, [and] lacking both transparency and formality' (Gaughan, 2013: p. 194).

2.3.1. Visibility and networking

As the review of the appointment process above highlights, how directors are appointed rests significantly on the likelihood of individuals coming into contact with 'gatekeepers' (van den Brick, 2013): the Chair of the board (Burke, 1997; 2000; Mattis, 1993; 2000; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005), current board members (particularly those on nomination committees), or executive search firms

(Bushell, 2015; Arfken *et al.*, 2004). Candidates' success therefore depends on their ability to forge and maintain personal networks of connections with potential appointing boards (Ibarra and Hunter, 2007).

Social capital and social network theories are frequently put forward as possible explanations for the lack of women on boards (Bushell, 2015; Gaughan, 2013; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Bushell (2015) in her research on the appointment of non-executives concludes (as I have here, although for different reasons) that the human capital explanation is unsatisfactory; similarly, she rejects the notion that women do not have the right personal traits, and argues that a social capital explanation is most useful for understanding the lack of women on boards, as the majority of candidates come through networks, and the primary mode of recruitment is appointers reaching out (Elliott, 2000; McDonald, 2010; McDonald and Elder, 2006). This requires the individual to have a 'quality' network (Bushell, 2015), featuring both weak and strong ties[11] (Granovetter, 1973; 1983) to people in positions of power. Gaughan (2011) reaches a similar conclusion: she notes the importance of having the right human and social capital for the boardroom, and argues that they combine to form what she refers to as 'reputational capital': Chairs in the search and appointment of NEDs will seek out direct or indirect connections to reference a candidate's reputation. Drawing on a network theory approach, Hillman and colleagues (2000; 2002) argue that organisations seek directors who are connected to potential resources or other firms, applying a rational, resource-dependant perspective on why boards may seek better-connected (read: male) individuals.

[11] Weak ties provide the individual with 'non-redundant' connections to other individuals; whilst those individuals may not be guarantees of assistance, a wide spread of connections will means the individual has access to a great deal of information. In the context of board appointments, this will affect which board positions the candidate knows about. The strength of strong ties comes in the obligation to reciprocation that the tie implies; weak ties are more likely to have access to information, but those with strong ties are more likely to offer that information up (Granovetter, 1973; 1983)

A social capital or social network explanation draws on a wide literature in the gender and organizations field, where differing networks has been presented as a key explanation for women's difficulty reaching senior positions, particularly in areas where visibility and knowing the right people are prerequisites for success (Ibarra, 1992; 1997; Burgess and Theranou, 2002). It is widely understood that women and men have different access to networks, and utilise them differently (Burke *et al.*, 1995; Ibarra, 1992; 1993; 1997). Often drawing on social network analysis (Brass *et al.*, 2004; Ibarra *et al.*, 2005) which focuses on network structures and outcomes, research has demonstrated that women's networks tend to be less broad, less diverse, and contain lower status members (Ibarra, 1992; Brass, 1985). Men's networks offer them higher status mentors and peers (McGuire, 2000) and women have less centrality within their networks (Ibarra, 1992; Mehra *et al.*, 1998).

One explanation for women and men's differing network is their structural placement. Because women frequently hold roles that have less power, influence and lower authority, their networks are also of lower status and power (McGuire, 2000). Other research has highlighted that even when status is controlled and accounted for, there is still evidence of women receiving fewer benefits from their networks (Ibarra, 2000; McGuire, 2000). McGuire (2000) suggests that status characteristics theory plays a role in who people choose to network with: individuals make value judgments based on the characteristics an individual is assumed to possess, based on their gender or race (McGuire, 2000). This suggests that even when women are in powerful positions, men are less likely to perceive them as such, and may be less inclined to network with them. In the case of women on boards, this suggests that women's relative lack of social capital in the form of networks, or their perceived lack of status even when they are in senior roles, will provide them less visibility to board members.

Another explanation for women's differing networks and their exclusion from the boardroom is homophily: a historically consistent phenomenon, proverbially summarised in the phrase 'birds of feather flock together' (McPhereson *et al.*, 2001). It refers to individuals' tendency to interact and

associate with those similar to themselves and who share their opinions and behaviour (Holgersson, 2012; Ibarra, 1992; 1993; 1995; 1997; 1998; Kilduff and Tsai, 2003). In the case of gender it describes the phenomenon whereby men and women prefer and seek out same-gender interaction, connections and friendships (Travers and Pemberton, 2000). This frequently draws on a history of research into male and female friendships: homophily is observed in childhood friendship studies (McPhereson *et al.*, 2001)), and remains consistent in adulthood. When these factors are continued in the workplace they perpetuate power difference.

Homophily in workplace settings has been highlighted by a range of studies, demonstrating that men's networks are more homophilous than women's, while women have more close interpersonal ties with women outside the direct subunits within their organisation (Ibarra, 1993; 1995; 1997). Men are more likely to have social circles and workplace networks that are larger, wider and heterogeneous, whilst women's are smaller, tighter-knit and more homogenous (McPhereson *et al.*, 2001). Ibarra and others (Holgersson 2012; McPhereson *et al.*, 2001) have also pointed out that individuals are more inclined to network with high-status individuals (Ibarra, 1992) and homophily is more useful for men than for women in employment situations because it allows them access to other powerful individuals. Men's power in networks is therefore self-reproducing: they are inclined to network with other powerful men, rather than (relatively powerless) women (Holgersson, 2012; Ibarra, 1992; 1997). Men's homophily gives them access to a wider range of individuals that they can draw upon for many functions, while it can be a barrier for women.

Ibarra (1997) has further argued that one explanation for male homophily is that both men and women are motivated to form connections with high-status individuals, who are often men in the workplace. Women instead frequently have to resort to heterophily (Ibarra, 1997) in order to access high-status individuals, and this can be more difficult to utilise. Heterophilous work relationships can be problematic because of assumptions about 'sexual undertones' (van den Brink, 2013), and often work relationships between women and men are over-sexualized (Beatty, 2007). This excludes

women from men's informal networking practices and gatherings (Hewlett *et al.*, 2010; Martin, 2003) and puts women in a double-bind: whilst homophily will not engender the same benefits for them as it does for men, the heterophily required may be more difficult for them to achieve.

The way that men and women use their networks is also gendered, and moderated by gendered workplace expectations. It is argued in the gender and networks literature that women are more likely to use their networks for support and friendship, while men's are more instrumental and can be more easily and readily used for self-promotion, passing information and increasing their own visibility (Forrett and Dougherty, 2001; Ibarra, 1992; 1993). Mavin and colleagues (2012; 2013) offer a more critical feminist perspective, arguing that women's affective connection with their friends prevents them from using workplace friends in an instrumental way (Mavin *et al.*, 2012; 2013) and often means they focus on the work at hand, and see workplace relationships and friendships as irrelevant to progression. This is in part to avoid gendered stereotypes: making friends at work is to fall into a 'feminine' stereotype and face judgment from peers or employers (*ibid*.). Benschop (2009) similarly found that men and women are constrained by a micro-politics of gendering in their networking practices: women have to emphasise their professional identity and deliberately move away from 'unproductive and feminine sociality' (2009: p. 233), for instance by emphasising the instrumental function of their work networks. In contrast, men's professionalism is rarely challenged by their networking practices, even if they draw upon social practices or vulnerability. Mavin and colleagues (2012; 2013) also argue that women's utilisation of workplace friendships goes against meritocratic ideals of how their careers might be furthered. This is in contrast to the 'old boys' network' that men easily employ, where the boundaries between friendships and work are not as important.

Whilst work on gender differences in networks is helpful in understanding why women's networks may affect their access to boards, it has been criticised in its scope, for its frequent treatment of gender as a salient category, and of networks as static. Often research into homophily, for example, is tautological: the desire to socialise with similar individuals produces homogenous networks, which

are then reproduced by homophily, but it is not clear what causes the homophily apart from individuals' (presumably inherent or 'natural') affinity with people who are similar to themselves. They also often rely on the utilisation of social capital and networking theories (van den Brink, 2013; Benschop, 2009; Ely and Padavic, 2007) and quantitative data, which does not consider women's affective accounts (Ibarra, 1992; 1997). Much like the human capital explanation, there is a tendency to examine sex difference after the fact; studying networks once they are formed (Brass *et al.*, 2004; Ibarra *et al.*, 2005) and take an abstract view of neutral actors connected to each other (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014).

This is to the detriment of understanding the process and practice of networking (Shaw, 2006), and the activities that produce and maintain networks. To address this shortcoming, van den Brink and Benschop (2014) advocate the adoption of a networking practices approach. Such an approach focuses on what people are 'doing and saying' in interactions. This means examining 'the dynamic, socio-political actions of building, maintaining, and using relations at work for personal, career, and organizational benefits [such as] maintaining contacts, socializing, forming coalitions, negotiating, and sharing or withholding information' (van den Brink and Benschop 2013, p. 470). By examining how individuals go about building and maintaining their networks, through understanding how their interactions with others contribute to this, research can move beyond a static approach to networks.

This is evident in much of the research into directors and networks, as it presumes that visibility and the network are crucial to success, with much less focus on how networks are accessed, mobilised, and how networking is done. In much of the discussion around getting women on boards there is a sense that potential candidates simply need to be known by the people making the decisions, rather than actively pushing themselves forward (McGregor, 2000; Singh *et al.*, 2002; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2000). Adams and Flynn (2005) conclude that 'whatever preparatory route women take, they need to be *noticed*, the need to be on the radar screen as capably and available candidates' (2005: p. 843, my emphasis. See also Fondas, 2000; Burgess and Theranou, 2000). Even in discussions around

having the right experience we see this tendency: Burgess and colleagues (2007), in examining the traits of board members, argue that an individuals' investment in their own experience and skills allows progression and advancement that will 'help them have the visibility to be *freely chosen* for boards' (Burgess *et al.,* 2007: p. 226, my emphasis). This then treats visibility as something inert: either the candidate is visible and connected, or they are not. This fails to fully account for the multitude of influences on how individuals' enter and navigate within their networks, or how networking practices affect their chances of being appointed.

Although she was not explicitly taking a practice or a gendered perspective, Bushell's (2015) research into the appointment of non-executives argued that women seeking board roles are less keen on networking than men, and do not like to promote themselves in the same way that men do. She asserts that most of the men had built and maintained relationships with a large number of individuals who made decisions on who to nominate and select for board roles, and described a 'proactive relationship management programme': an 'active programme to nurture strong ties and maintain weak ties' (Bushell, 2015: p. 168), employed to ensure that they keep in contact with people that might be useful in the future. The kind of networking the men described was therefore highly strategic: they has specific outcomes in mind, and described a full networking strategy and plan that they designed and executed in order to get board roles. Men were also more likely to have an on-going relationship with a headhunter, while women targeted them more 'tactically' (2015: p. 177). These findings hint at different ways that men and women do networking, with an inference that this may lead to inequality; however, because the focus was not on the networking practices and gendered discourses surrounding the process, she does not present a gendered analysis of what might result in this difference, or what effect it might have. The presumption is that men's proactive networking must be the reason for their relative success.

This conclusion is problematised however when taken into the wider account of how networking leads to success, and the reliance on recommendations. As van den Brink and Benschop

(2014) found in their research into academia, in recruitment that is facilitated by gatekeepers, candidates are typically invited to apply or must be explicitly directed to a vacancy rather than applying directly. In director roles this is particularly the case as roles are rarely, if ever, publicly advertised. This also means that self-nominations, or an individual putting themselves forward for roles is not welcome from those appointing, and the individual instead has to gain visibility to gatekeepers or 'scouts' (ibid.). Although van den Brink and Benschop do not expand on it in their analysis, this may suggest that individuals who are 'too' targeted with their networking will be less likely to be successful, by not following the norms of elite recruitment. This may challenge the notion that strategic networking is the primary route to success, and suggest that while their networking has to be strategic, it also has to be subtle or surreptitious. This idea is also supported by research into search firms: ethnographic work into search firms practice (Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Wirz, 2014a) has highlighted that headhunters place high significance on their ability to find candidates for their databases and for roles; they far less commonly take individuals who contact them directly or who are not recommended to them by a third party.

Another issue with applying homophily and gender and networks theories to the case of women on boards is that women seeking board roles at very senior levels are likely to have surmounted many of the barriers that are faced lower down in hierarchal organisations, already hold high-status occupational roles, and their networks are likely to have contributed to their success. There is therefore a need to rethink much of the gender and networks conclusions to account for the increased presence of women in the corporate elite, and understanding how their connections – both with men and other women – have contributed to their success. Mavin and colleagues (2013) argue that the focus on social network analysis has been at the detriment of research into women's affective relationships and friendships in workplace contexts, and leaving intra-gender relations (i.e. relations between women) under-researched and under-theorised. This is particularly important given the emergence of an increased presence of women in senior elite roles, problematising the assumption that women's progression is solely as a result of their having different networks and/or more

heterophilous networks to men.

The tendency to ignore the study of women's workplace relations with other women is also at odds with other areas of the workplace and organisation literature, which commonly contain elements of female solidarity as a recommendation for women's advancement in employment (Mavin *et al.*, 2013). In order to subvert male dominance in the workplace, it is suggested that women need to move beyond token status, form coalitions, become allies, develop support networks and in doing so be able to effect cultural change of masculine organisations (Kanter, 1977); this is also seen in the importance placed on women having female mentors and sponsors (Ibarra, 2001;Ibarra et al., 2010), the recommendation of female networks (Bierema, 2006), and a general rhetoric of positivity around women's relationships with other women at work. Mavin and colleagues (2012) have argued that women's ability to have 'positive intra-gender relations' (Mavin, 2006a; 2006b), forming homophilous, strong friendships or relationships with other women in the workplace is perceived as offering the potential to enable them to compete and cooperate simultaneously, as men already do to great success. This is also seen in more recent discourses around neoliberal feminism, where connections with other women are frequently presented as a strategic contribution to individual success in the workplace (see for example Sandberg, 2014).

Part of the women on boards agenda in the UK has also taken this up, through the formation of formal women on boards networks, by a range of organisations with the aim of increasing women's visibility and strengthening their networks. Wider research into women's formal networks notes often the assumption is that these networks offer women support and solidarity, and opportunities to network in a more formal setting, allowing them to share information and learning experiences with other women (Cross and Armstrong, 2008; O'Neil *et al.*, 2011; Vinnicombe *et al.* 2004) with the presumption that these two factors will help women to be successful (Bierema, 2005; Scott, 1998). Whilst these may be useful for women in terms of building support and solidarity, they are often limited in their effects because they are very rarely sources of actual power (Scott, 1998), or can risk

becoming talking shops or 'wine and whine clubs' (Wittenberg-Cox, 2010: p. 63). Bierema (2005) found that whilst women's networks offered a structure that was useful for sharing and in-group support, women felt uncomfortable being a part of it, worrying they would be perceived as 'male-bashing', 'needing help', or that the network was purely for social reasons rather than instrumental. She concludes that the emulation of male power structures is not necessarily the best way to improving women's presence in positions of power, because of how they are perceived by organisations (Bierema, 2005; O'Neil *et al.*, 2011).

In a similar way, the assertion that women need to network with each other can also be problematised as a result of wider social cultural expectations; because of neoliberal cultures of work and competitiveness, 'solidarity' is often overshadowed by an individualist culture of 'every woman for herself' (Starr, 2001: p. 9). One example of this is in the oft-quoted 'Queen Bee Syndrome' (Abramson, 1975; Mavin, 2006a; 2006b; Staines *et al.*, 1973), relating to a female leader that attacks other women who threaten her power, or who seeks to undermine the success of other woman. The phrase has gained cultural currency in public discourse and is used to label senior and successful women who are viewed as not being supportive (or sisterly) enough towards other women: those who are perceived as having 'relinquished feminist agendas and sisterhood, in the pursuit of masculine agendas which, while bestowing personal benefits, exclude women in general' (Starr, 2001: p. 9). Mavin and colleagues (2012) in their research into senior women found that they often engaged in 'female misogyny' or 'negative intra gender relations', talking about and behaving towards other women in a way that consciously or unconsciously aims to 'subjugate, undermine, exclude and stigmatise other women' (Mavin *et al.*, 2012: p. 25). Rather than being supportive of each other, they subtly seek to undermine each other's authority and credibility.

While a lot is known about the structural characteristics and outcomes of networks, the literature as it stands demonstrates that much less is known about the processes of networking, and how gender identity construction occurs as part of networking, understanding both gender and

networking as dynamic and complex. Through understanding networking as 'practice' rather than as 'done', and taking a broader account of how networking practices may be gendered (van den Brink, 2013; Benschop, 2009), we can reveal gendered differences in their formation and maintenance. There is a growing literature considering how socio-cultural contexts can constrain and shape network(ing) inequalities (Ely and Padavic, 2007), recognising that networks are not static connections between people, and not simply the result of choice or circumstance; rather, they are 'social-spatial constructions' (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009: p. 803), influenced by gendered expectations. In the case of women on boards, there is a need to build on the social capital explanation for their absence by examining their networking practices and how they are gendered, rather than presuming that their networks are different. There is also a need to understand how they make sense of their relationships with men as gatekeepers, but also to understand how they negotiate the increased proportion of women in these spaces: through discourses of competition and/or solidarity. Such a perspective can broaden our understanding of gender and boards.

2.4. Gender and Organisations

In explaining the absence of women from the workplace, and particularly from senior roles, insights have been gained from theories of gender and organisation. Previously, perspectives and theories of organisation and management were gender-blind; it is not that gender is raised as an issue and then dismissed; rather, often such work was completely silent about gender, strongly implying that it simply is not an issue for organisations (Hatch, 2010). Challenging this, a wide range of research studies emerged, demonstrating that and how gender affects work relations and interactions, offering explanations for gender inequality, and dismissing any suggestion that the way organisations judge individuals are 'objective' or 'gender neutral' (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991; Kanter, 1977; Roper, 1994).

Early research on gender and organisations came from two interconnected perspectives: sex-role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2000) and status characteristics theory (Bierneat and Kobrynowick, 1997); both explain men and women's differing place in workplace organisations by drawing attention to their differing hierarchal position and treatment in work. The first posits that men and women occupy roles in society that require different characteristics and behaviours for success, and this leads to the expectation that they have the behaviours and temperament to better occupy certain roles (Carli and Eagly, 1999). From this perspective, women being largely absent from senior roles historically has led to the belief that men are better at being leaders, resulting in organisations continuing to favour masculine traits, and individuals who fit a masculine leadership model being chosen and promoted faster. Status characteristics theory (Bierneat and Kobrynowick, 1997) is similar, but relates these gendered differences to status: an individual's *status* affects how they are expected to interact or perform, and therefore how hierarchies are enacted (Ridgeway, 2001). In this model gender acts as a 'diffuse status characteristic' (*ibid.*), which carries expectations and beliefs about the relative competence of the individual (Carli and Eagly, 1999; Ridgeway, 2011; Roth *et al.*, 2012). Women's lower hierarchal status means they are seen as less competent, and have to work harder to be seen as credible or get the same rewards for their competence.

Variations of these perspectives have been used at length to explain women's absence from senior roles. Theories of gendered leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2003) or 'think manager, think male' bias (Ryan *et al.*, 2011), for example, start and end with the conclusion that women are held to differing standards than men in workplace organisations, and/or are treated differently (Calas *et al.*, 2014). Gender is treated as a cultural frame (Ridgway, 2011) that individuals use to make sense of workplace relations, organisations and their location within them, by drawing on gendered stereotypes about other people's status, roles and traits. Ridgeway (2011) argues that gender thus provides 'an ever-available framework for filling in the details of an uncertain work task, setting, or person and for providing an overarching, simplifying interpretation of complex circumstances' (2011, p. 93). These gendered stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality.

Although useful, gender and organisation perspectives have been critiqued for having limited scope, due to their reliance on a 'body counting' starting point (Calás *et al.*, 2014; Martin, 2001): even while aiming to account for broader organisation processes and areas of bias, they use functionalist and positivist orientations. Often these perspectives look at the hierarchy (or hierarchies) that make up organisations and highlight 'problems' – cases or occurrences where there is gender imbalance – and then draw conclusions about what caused the imbalance. This frequently has the underlying inference that gender bias comprises meritorious individuals being treated unfairly, in an otherwise gender-neutral system, and thus rests on a tautological argument in which sex difference is demonstrated empirically (and then used to explain sex differences) without interrogating what the 'difference' is. Therefore, repeated research endeavours comes to the same conclusion: 'women face difficulties in organisations, and they are judged as inferior to men' (Calás *et al.*, 2014, p. 34).

Research into women on boards frequently relies on such a gender and organisation grounding, and is therefore limited in its scope for the same reasons: it frequently starts from a 'body counting' perspective, identifying the area of inequality and drawing conclusions about to its cause.

This fails to challenge the basic assumption that the process of board appointments is rational; the implication is that people are evaluated and hired solely based on their qualifications and performance, and that preferences for men are due to boards needing certain experience, traits, or fit more commonly possessed by men. The social capital explanation has a similar issue: research into the director appointment process highlights its opacity, lack of rigour and thus its reliance on networks (Withers *et al*, 2012), it then draws on wider research into differing network structures and outcomes as an explanation for women's absence from boards. Like the human capital explanations, this relies on methodology that examines sex differences after the fact, by looking at women's networks and drawing conclusions about how they were formed and how they may have affected women's chances of being chosen for boards.

Although these explanations are valuable as a starting point for identifying gender bias and inequality, they fail to interrogate the presumption that the process is rational, and take as read that having the right or wrong experience, personality or networks will affect an individual's chance of being chosen. There is a tendency to retrospectively examine the difference between men and women on boards, and take that to mean that factors that are measurable or easy to examine after the difference has occurred (such as a person's educational background or the size of their network) must have been the cause of it. These also largely use quantitative, functionalist and positivist methodologies, and consistently treat gender as an *a priori* demographic category (Jeanes *et al.*, 2011).

To address this, scholars have called for a 'gendering' organisation perspective, which looks at how gender is 'done', how organisational structures *constitute* gendered hierarchies (Calas *et al.*, 2014), rather than simply being the place in which the bias occurs (Ackerman, 2006). This perspective treats gender as socially constructed and processual: as something 'done' or accomplished through social practice, rather than as a static or demographic category. West and Zimmerman (1987) pioneered this understanding, seeing gender as something 'done' through adherence to social norms;

individuals must pay attention to their bodily displays of gender (appearance, dress, demeanour and interaction) all of which combine to make gender a cultural accomplishment, rather than a biological imperative or binary category. Multiple gender-as-doing perspectives have drawn on this approach; more recently, accounts have also drawn on Butler's perspective on gender as performative and 'done' (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1994). Gendering perspectives typically focus on the bodily existence of gender in relation to physical actions, or the discursive and/or narrative actions. Gender can be conceived as performative and performed as a strategic narrative assertion (Kondo, 1990), manoeuvring (Schippers, 2002), displaying (Schrock and Padavic, 2007), mobilising and practiced (Martin, 2001), and a socio-spatial practice (Bird and Sokolofski 2005).

The application of a gendering organisations perspective to gender and boards can contribute to our understanding of how and why women are excluded from the boardroom. In relation to individual-level characteristics, the current literature would benefit from research, which is explicitly designed to illuminate how factors such as having the right experience, right personality or fitting with the board are enacted in the process of appointment. Understanding how individuals make sense of the experience of seeking roles and how they draw on their experience, personal traits and fit with the board therefore offers a way to build on this research. Applying a gendering organisation perspective will also allow for an examination of the process of networking, and how gender identity construction occurs as part of this practice. The work on networking practices (Benschop, 2009; van den Brink and Benschop, 2014) advocates this change in framework, from a static and quantitative epistemology to one that examines process and practice of networking, by understanding both gender and networking as dynamic and complex. Through understanding networking as 'practice' rather than as 'done', and taking a broader account of how networking practices may be gendered (van den Brink, 2013; Benschop, 2009), we can reveal gendered differences in their formation and maintenance. In the case of women on boards, there is a need to build on the social capital explanation for their absence by examining their networking practices and how they are gendered, rather than presuming that their networks are different.

2.5. Gender and Elites

In addition to understanding women on boards within a gendering organisations perspective, it is important to place corporate boards within a wider context. A broader understanding of the lack of women on boards can be drawn by situating their existence outside the organisational setting (Seierstad, 2016). Here, I outline the importance of understanding directors as part of a particular population and class of individuals rather than simply individuals at the top of an organisation, and through understanding the broader social and feminist context around the women on boards initiative in the UK.

The gender and organisations literature has been used to examine a wide range of organisations and workplace contexts; however, it has less commonly examined women who occupy very senior or 'elite' roles in organisations using a gendering organisations perspective, while the leadership literature has primarily treated women in senior roles in gender-neutral terms. The relative lack of research into gender and elites is due to a number of factors. First, there are a relatively small number of women in this elite; until relatively recently the political, social and business elites have been almost exclusively male, and there have simply not been enough women in these spaces to study. As Mavin and Grandy point out in their recent research into women in senior/elite roles, 'women elite leaders remain rare [and] their experiences are under-researched' (2016b, p.394; see also Terjesen *et al.*, 2009).

Another reason for the relatively limited study of gender and elites is that women in senior or elite roles in businesses are often regarded as highly privileged. Women in these roles share 'space' with men within a gendered order, and therefore hold significant organizational and individual power (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b). By gaining 'parity with the One' (De Beauvoir, 1949, in Mavin and Grandy, 2016b) – they can be viewed as those who have, by definition, already found success in the organisation (Calas *et al.*, 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2016b). This means therefore the experiences of women who are regarded as having 'made it' are often disregarded. It is often argued by scholars of

gender, work and organisations, that it is elitist – a 'luxury problem' (Adams, 2014) – to study those who are already in positions of power. By the same token, the application of other theories of gender in the workplace to their situation is understandably limited, because to a large extent, women in these roles have already surmounted many of the barriers that are faced by women lower down in hierarchal organisations.

Yet the extant literature on gender and elites and women in senior roles has demonstrated how women in these roles occupy a unique space, which can offer many new avenues for theorising (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b, p. 394; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Ethnographic work such as that by Fisher (2012) or McDowell (1997) has shone a light on the specificities of women in elite corporate roles and their working environments, highlighting issues they may face in highly masculinised spaces (Ellemers *et al.*, 2012) and their influence on these spaces (Chesterman *et al.*, 2005). Drawing on this, Mavin and Grandy (2016) argue that female elite leaders can be considered a 'sometimes privileged' (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014, p. 433) minority: simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged. This understanding is afforded by a wider view of the concept of privilege, as something 'socially constructed, fluid, relational and unstable' (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b; 281; see also Berry and Bell, 2012; Leonard, 2010; Sealy, 2010), and that people (particularly women) move in and out of it (Choules, 2006). Atewologun and Sealy (2014) argue that privilege is changeable due to its multi-dimensional quality, and a deeper understanding can therefore be gained from understanding the ways in which it is contested, conferred and contextual, particularly in places where individuals move in and out of privilege. Authors in these areas highlight the importance of understanding how privilege can be understood and negotiated; advocating the need to study people who are in place of its contestation; those who occupy precarious or negotiated positions of privilege, not just those who are *not* privileged.

2.5.1. The Wealth Elite

Wider sociological literature has also highlighted the importance of understanding the existence of elites, and how they operate within wider society (Savage and Williams, 2008; Savage, 2015). As with the gender and elites literature, it is noted that modern elites – particularly the corporate or business elite – are under-studied and under-theorised (*ibid*.). The elite classes have frequently been the domain of political theory rather than sociological; and while sociological research on class has frequently been focused on the distinction between middle and working classes, there has been relatively little theorisation of the elite, despite them holding a position of immense power in British society (Savage and Williams, 2008; Savage *et al.*, 2013).

Sociological literature has also demonstrated the changing nature and existence of elites in British society. Drawing on data from the BBC's Great British Class Survey, (the largest survey of social class ever conducted in the UK)[12] Savage and colleagues (2013) found what they refer to as a 'wealth elite' or 'professional executive class' (Bennet *et al.*, 2009; Savage *et al.*, 2013): the most advantaged and privileged socio-economic group in the UK, possessing the highest levels of economic, social and cultural capital. This elite holds 'occupational narrowness', including over-representation of chief executive officers and directors, financial managers, bankers and management consultants, along with more 'traditionally' elite professions such as lawyers and barristers. Conceptually, this group can be differentiated from (and sit above) the 'moderately affluent' middle class (Savage, 2015, p. 224), and differ from what has historically been understood as the upper classes. Their average age is 57; they have the lowest proportion of ethnic minorities (4%); the highest proportion of graduates (particularly from elite universities); and they tend to be geographically over-represented in London and the south-east of England. Pertinently, for this research, 50% of them are female.

[12] 161,400 web respondents and a nationally representative sample survey, which included questions on social, cultural and economic capital.

The authors argue that the existence and traits of this group 'clearly demonstrate the power of a relatively small, socially and spatially exclusive group at the apex of British society, whose economic wealth sets them apart from the great majority of the population' (Savage *et al.*, 2013, p. 226). Their increasing wealth in comparison to all other classes, and their decreasing use of state education, healthcare and benefits marks a pulling away of this class from all others, and indicates the emergence of an elite that is starkly different to others, both economically and socially. The identification of this elite necessitates further investigative study, to explore its existence beyond demographic categorisation, and to use more nuanced understandings of class as a way to 'strategically open up issues of concern' (Savage, 2015, p. 224).

To understand some of the cultural characteristics of the 'wealth elite', other research has noted its cultural history in the UK. This elite (particularly the financial industry, which is concentrated in the City of London)[13] has traditionally been based on the cultural norms of 'gentlemanly capitalism' (Augar, 2008). Occupations in this elite rest on dense networks of colleagues, regulators and clients, who have similar class and educational backgrounds (Kynaston, 2001), and who facilitate industries dependent on trust-based relationships (Pryke, 2001; Cook *et al.*, 2007). This also relies on and perpetuates cultural values of honour, virtue and trust, and has legitimated a certain kind of worker: rational, decisive, determined and bold (Augar, 2008; Hall, 2013). S/he (although they were, until recently, almost exclusively male) was also imbued with certain ways of being, talking and dressing. These norms have historically resulted in this elite having two key aspects that restrict entry: recruitment according to an embodied norm that was both classed and gendered; and a reliance on networks, both for recruitment and as a necessary part of the work itself (*ibid*.).

[13] Geographically different to the city of London, which refers to the city at large; the City of London is a borough within the city, wherein the majority of the financial industry has historically been based.

McDowell (1997) argues that during the 1980s, these discourses of 'gentlemanly capitalism' were challenged: the 'advisory' role that had previously been implicit in the financial industries in particular was replaced with a more technical trading function (Augar, 2008; Hall, 2013); the reliance on trust was reduced; and this saw the rise of new forms of 'sexy/greedy' masculinities in these industries (McDowell, 1997). As well as the emergence of a different kind of masculinity in the workplace (to which the financial crisis is often connected, as explored later in the chapter), this also led to increased demand for recruitment, and necessitated broader recruitment beyond the narrow, traditional elites. This rapid increase in recruitment outside the traditional elite also led to a perception that the recruitment process had become more meritocratic, democratic, and open to a wider range of people (Leyshon and Thrift, 1997).

This same shift has occurred in the corporate governance literature; the concentration of members of the (traditional) elite on corporate boards and the resulting homogeneity of boards has often been cited as a contributing factor in all manner of failures. There is concomitant renewed attention given to governance and the composition of boards, in relation to making the appointment process more rigorous and transparent, and opening up boards to a wider demographic (Van Ees *et al.*, 2009; Roberts, 2015; Prügl, 2015). The challenge to the historical make-up of boards and reliance on the 'Old Boys' network' for appointments, and the increased recruitment of individuals from outside the traditional elite, comes with a perception that the recruitment process is (more) meritocratic.

The literature in this area has advocated the need to make sense of the wealth elite beyond their economic or occupational locale, and instead as a simultaneously localised and global system, which has its own cultures of work: 'attitudes, habits and formal and informal rules' (Beaverstock, 2004, p. 145). These cultures of work are perpetuated and maintained through how they legitimate certain forms of elite behaviour and action, while deeming others 'non-legitimate' (Beaverstock, 2004; see also Hall, 2008; 2013; Ho, 2009; McDowell, 1997). This legitimation process acts as a

closure mechanism, which maintains their elite status, alongside a belief that these elites are more meritocratic than historical elites (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009). This was also seen in the research into executive search firms discussed earlier in the chapter, where research in this area shows that search firms reproduce hierarchal, restrictive networks (identified through their networking *practices*, as well as their networks) that are reminiscent of the elite networks of the past, but that comprise a new global elite.

While the resurgence of sociological analysis in elites is relatively new, it draws on a wide-ranging and vast sociological literature (see Savage and Williams, 2008 for an overview), and as Savage and colleagues note, has its roots in traditional analyses of class. Although there is not space here to outline all aspects of what is encompassed in this elites cultures and ways of being, there are a number of aspects that suggest that locating directors as members of a corporate elite can contribute to our understanding of how and why women's entry to boards has been restricted. It is noted that their use of the term elite here differentiates from historical understandings: Savage writes that it is useful to refer to it as an elite, because referring to an upper class 'conjures up images of the traditional landed gentlemen and senior professionals in their country estates and Mayfair clubs. But this is not the elite [they] delineate, which is fundamentally a senior corporate managerial group' (Savage, 2015). Board directors are therefore a key aspect of this group, and examining their cultures can broaden our understanding of women on boards.

As noted above, research into the appointment process demonstrates that entry to boards is limited by and to people who know the right people: joining boards is dependent on having the right networks, and visibility is often regarded as tantamount to success. Gaughan's (2012) research also suggests that directors are both explicitly and implicitly invested in the appointment process being as it is – opaque and based on networks – due to an insistence that it means recruiting the right people, with the right 'reputational capital'. This may also suggest it operates as a closure mechanism; a way of excluding those who are not part of this elite, willingly engaged in by those it benefits, and justified

through meritocratic means. There is therefore a need to examine this appointment process further from the perspective of those engaged in it, to understand how they navigate and make sense of entry into this corporate elite.

The research that points to directors needing to 'fit' in order to be successful is often mobilised to explain a lack of gender diversity on boards (Pye, 2001). Although useful in identifying gender difference, this takes for granted that there is a social difference between men and women that will result in women being excluded; because boards are majority men, women will not 'fit'. These accounts less readily account for the relationship between 'fit' and notions of privilege and class, which have been discussed at length in Sociological literature. It is understood that those who do not have the same elite status or cultures of work are less likely to 'fit', irrespective of gender (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2011). Gaughan's (2011) work also shows this in relation to boards: her conclusion that new directors to the FTSE 100 are regarded as entering the 'corporate elite' and have to have cultural fit with the norms and values of its members, because of the perceived reputational risk of having directors that do not represent these norms. Aspirant directors in her research drew on elite discourses – accounts that located their existence within this elite through references to elite markers of legitimacy and credibility – to demonstrate their 'board readiness' (Gaughan, 2011).

Often taking a Bourdiesuan perspective (Bourdieu, 1984), Sociologists in this area point to the ways that possession of the right cultural, social and economic capital mark certain individuals as legitimate members of this elite who will 'fit'. Research in this area has shown how members of elites may possess and make for instance, references to highbrow culture (Freidman, 2014); markers of cultural capital (Freidman *et al.*, 2015), visual markers of elite identity, bodily capital (Kuipers, 2015), displays of wealth, emphasis on restricted entry such as membership in private clubs, attendance at elite universities (Savage et al., 2015) holding the norms, values and political affiliations as current members, holding the same roles or experience as current members (of which directors, senior

executives would be a part), or be located within geographies associated with elite identities (Burrows, 2013; Cunningham and Savage, 2015). In this context then, although these are by no means the only markers useful to understanding the formation and maintenance of elites, it is most helpful to identify markers of elite status that may relate specifically to recruitment into organisations, and that may apply to the case of women on boards. Understanding directors as members of an individuated elite, with its own cultures and ways of being, may more thoroughly explain the relatively slow pace of change in relation to women.

Although it is notably absent from Savage's argument (and picked up lightly by Skeggs (2015) and Tyler (2015) in the same special issue) there is also minimal research into how these elites are gendered. Much of the theorisation of elites has been gender neutral, in large part due to the relatively few women who have occupied these spaces. Having historically been an all-male-space, there is value to examining the effects of an increased presence of women; there is a need to understand how they negotiate their privilege differently to men, if they draw on similar markers of elite status in their sense making, and how male cultures of being may vary or adapt to the increased presence of women. It is also suggested that there is value in locating the issue of women on boards within this framework, as the concern with entry and negotiation of this elite is of wider social concern than the relatively narrow issue of appointing more women.

2.6. Gender, Elites and Neoliberal Feminism

The increased number of women in elite business roles, particularly corporate boards, has been associated with and seen as representative of the neoliberalisation and corporatisation of feminism (Fraser, 2009; Gill and Orgad, 2016; McRobbie, 2009; 2013; Roberts, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014). It is argued that this represents a specific kind of feminism that has recently become popularised, and characterised by its neoliberal and individualistic rhetoric. While historic feminist movements have centred on making gender inequality visible and advocating for women's rights and/or gender equality, and 'post-feminism' was characterised by the repudiation of feminism (Scharff, 2010; Gill, 2001) and the belief that feminism had 'done its job', neoliberal feminism has been theorised as an awareness of and challenge to gender inequality, but one that is stripped of its moral, political and collective agenda. This produces, as Rottenberg (2014) argues, a neoliberal feminist subject: who is 'simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing [gender] inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care' (Rottenberg, 2014, p.420).

Two key attributes of neoliberal feminism are particularly relevant to understanding women on boards in context, both of which relate to the rise in 'business feminism' or 'corporate feminism' (Foster, 2016). The first is the so-called business case for gender equality: 'a 'loose constellation of social forces that has converged on an ideal that promoting gender equality is smart economics' (Roberts, 2015: p. 109), and that apply market rationality to feminist movements (Rottenburg, 2014). This is highlighted in the wide range of studies that put forth ever-increasing monetary values on the power of gender diversity: a recent report from the McKinsey Global Institute claimed that advancing women's equality and narrowing the gender gap could add $12 trillion to global growth (Woetzel *et al.*, 2015. See also Grant Thornton International, 2015). As noted earlier in the chapter, the business case for equality was widely adopted in relation to women on boards (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015), particularly in the UK, where a great number of claims were made about how the appointment of

women can provide business benefits, and offer businesses 'competitive edges' (Mattis, 2000: p. 270; McKinsey & Company, 2007).

Adrienne Roberts (2015) argues that the global financial crisis in 2008 was a notable pivotal moment for the business case for gender equality, because analysis of the crisis often attributed it, in part, to testosterone-heavy, risk-taking environments that the banks operated in, which women were largely absent from. This allowed for the '(re)emergence of the business case for gender equality' (2015: p. 124); from the financial crisis there developed a *women-as-saviours* narrative, where women were viewed as key to economic recovery, due to stereotypical, gendered assumptions that they are more risk-averse than men. Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for instance, infamously quipped that 'if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, today's economic crisis clearly would look quite different' (Lagarde, 2010: p. 1), a perspective that is often cited in media outputs (Prügl, 2012; Roberts, 2015), but that fails to account for what about the banking *system* contributed to the economic crisis. Instead the solution is placed onto women, with the presumption that adding women will address the issues. Reporting on the financial crisis and drawing on the (academic) business case often means that any gender-nuance it started with was lost (Brown and Kelan, 2016) and this reproduces an empirically unproven notion (Adams and Ragunathan, 2013; Coates and Herbert, 2008) that women can moderate the excessively risky and testosterone-driven behaviour of men simply with their presence (McDowell, 2011; Prügl, 2012).

A second facet to neoliberal feminism that is relevant to understanding women directors and the women on boards initiative is the creation and avocation of a neoliberal feminist discourse and subject. This subject acknowledges gender inequality, but s/he advocates for an internalised, self-realised, proactive subjectivity to tackle it, rather than challenging the social, cultural and economic forces that (re)produce this inequality (Fraser, 2009; Gill and Orgad, 2016; Rottenberg, 2014). Drawing on terms and concepts such as 'equality, opportunity, and free choice' (Rottenberg, 2014:

p. 422) forges a feminist subject who is entrepreneurial and individualised, 'oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative, and innovation' (*ibid*.). This neoliberal feminist subject is epitomised, Rottenberg argues, in Shery Sandberg's book *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013), a self-proclaimed feminist manifesto that argues for women's advancement in the workplace and publicly advocates feminist values (Adamson and Kelan, 2016); however, it does so by emphasising the importance of 'internalising the revolution' (Sandberg, 2013; quoted in Rottenberg, 2014; Gill and Orgad, 2016).

The neoliberal feminist discourse neatly converts gender equality into personal responsibility, as well as conflating equality with getting more women into positions of power. It is a call to arms to women to strive to reach the top of their organisations and demand a 'seat at the table', but one that only offers the revolutionary tools of 'confidence' (Gill and Orgad, 2016) and self-actualised, individuated progression, rather than solidarity and equality. This is particularly problematic because (in part drawing on a presumed linear narrative of progress) (Foster, 2016) it 'assumes that the revolution has in some sense already taken place and therefore all women need to do is to rouse themselves by absorbing and acting on this reality' (Rottenberg, 2014: p. 426). In the business case, it also privileges market rationality and capitalist benefits as an argument for women's progression; as Fraser (2009) argues, this is to disavow the important, feminist critique of capitalism.

While there are innumerable definitions of both neoliberalism and feminism that these analyses raise, for the purposes of examining the case of women on boards I draw on Rottenberg's (2014) definition here to understand neoliberal feminism as a combination of two key discourses: that of feminism and neoliberalism. 'What is feminism?' is (still!) a hotly debated topic, and indeed Fraser (2013) evokes these debates in her analysis, using liberal feminism as the precursor to neoliberal feminism and arguing that the rise of neoliberal feminism is due to second-wave feminism's privileging of recognition and identity politics over economic justice, and consequently a failure to challenge capitalist or material logics. As Rottenberg points out, Fraser's theorisation of a new kind

of feminist subject through criticism and blame of an old one is problematic; however, acknowledging that feminist goals of gender equality have become co-opted by the market logic of capitalism provides a useful framework for understanding current feminist debates, particularly around corporate feminism and women on boards.

For the purpose of this thesis then, I take a wide definition of feminism and feminist discourses as: the awareness and addressing of political, economic, and social inequality of the sexes, through the advocacy of women's rights. I also draw on Wendy Brown's (Brown, 2005) analysis of neoliberalism and neoliberal rationality, a Foucauldian perspective on governmentality where governance of individuals is related to their subjectivity; where people's conduct is dictated by individualised logics and a need to self-govern and enhance their own well-being (Brown, 2005; see also Larner, 2000; Rose, 1993). Neoliberal feminism is a conceptual combination of these two discourses: an acknowledgement of gender inequality to such an extent that it appears self-evident, but that is attributed to individualised logics, and solutions that are reliant on individual (women) rather than structural change. The new neoliberal feminist subject is entrepreneurial; she acknowledges the challenges she will face as a woman and finds ways to negotiate them through 'incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation' (Rottenberg, 2014, p.423), rather than collective feminist action or advocacy.

These theoretical critiques are necessarily bound up with work on women in senior leadership and gender and elites: they have been used to make sense of the existence of specific individuals in the business elite. Business celebrities (Adamson and Kelan, 2016) such as Sheryl Sandberg, and the women on boards agenda are frequently mentioned as part of their analyses (see for example Gill and Orgad, 2016; Foster, 2016). Despite this, they have not been readily used to make sense of the experience of women on boards. They can be brought in to understand the experiences of women in this elite, to build a more rounded, thorough critique of elites and understand the discourses that women in these roles draw on to make sense of their experiences.

3. Researching Gender and boards: Epistemology, Methodology and Methods

In the previous chapter I explored and outlined the current research on women on boards. This highlighted that there are two common explanations for the lack of women on boards: a human capital or individual characteristics explanation, and a social capital or networks explanation. The first examines individual traits of directors, and the second their networks and connections, to understand why women may face barriers to the boardroom. The chapter also examined the drawbacks of both accounts.

These two perspectives have been described at length in the literature; however, they face three limitations. The first is methodological: approaches have primarily relied upon examination of publicly available data on current board members, in order to make inferences about how and why directors were chosen. Research into the appointment process rarely if ever takes a prospective, processual or longitudinal focus, to examine how the appointment process occurs in practice, and the discourses and expectations that are embedded and reproduced in how it occurs. The second limitation to the current research is that it treats the lack of women primarily as a body-counting issue; it looks at the numbers of men and women, and treats them as discrete and static categories for comparison. This therefore fails to understand gender as a 'doing', something that wider research into gender and organisation has criticised, for its failure to understand how gender is socially constructed, within and by organisation(s) (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Calas *et al.*, 2014; Gill, 2008; Kelan, 2008). The third limitation to the women on boards research (particularly in the UK) is its failure to place women on boards within a wider context, either of the recent resurgence in the studies of elites, or recent discourses around neoliberal feminism.

To address these limitations, this study provides an in-depth longitudinal analysis of how non-executive directors are appointed, and how the process is gendered. The research will examine how individuals discuss aspects of the human and social capital explanations as they are going through the

process of seeking board roles, rather than solely taking a retrospective view. It will also look at how candidates draw on gendered discourses to make sense of the process, and how these relate to wider social discourses. In doing so, it will highlight how treatment of gender as a social construct (and situating the women on boards agenda within a wider context) can broaden and deepen our understanding of women on boards and how directors are appointed.

This chapter will outline the epistemology, methodology and methods of the research study. First, it will state the research epistemology, framing the value of social constructionist research, and of utilising methodology that understands gender as a doing rather than a category. Next it will outline the methodology used in the project: a longitudinal, interview-based qualitative research design, and how the sample was established. Finally, it will expand on how the interview data was analysed.

3.1. Epistemology

It has already been noted by previous researchers into women on boards that a better understanding of appointment processes is best obtained using in-depth, qualitative methods (Burke and Mattis, 2000) and by utilising a gendered perspective (Izraeli, 2000), and that these perspectives are missing from much of the analysis into this area (Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Where qualitative research has been conducted, it often takes the form of interview-based methods, utilising (presumably, although often not specified as such) thematic analysis (see for example Sheridan and Milgate, 2005; Doldor *et al.*, 2012). This is problematic because it frequently treats interviewees' accounts as representative of 'truth', something that both social constructionist researchers and gender researchers have challenged. These perspectives challenge the assumption that there is a single, social reality to discover, and that it can be examined through research or expressed through language (Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Cunliff, 2000). Constructionist perspectives instead see reality as a social construction (Symond *et al.*, 2000) and seek to be aware of how that reality is constructed within the research setting. In this approach, interviews are understood as interactive, co-productive practices, in which knowledge, discourses, meanings and narratives are not merely revealed, but jointly created by the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Vähäsantanen and Saarinn, 2013).

A social constructionist approach is particularly useful for research into gendered phenomena because it allows for an understanding of gender as something that is 'done' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or 'performed' (Butler, 1990), rather than as a stable, demographic category for analysis. Treating gender as a stable comparison category is problematic in the case of women on boards and gender equality more broadly, because it also treats the increased number of women as the overall aim; in the British women on boards context, this also manifests in the way that the Davies review and women on boards agenda are treated as a success, because of the rapid increase in the number of women (cf. Doldor *et al.*, 2016; Davies, 2015). This 'body counting' perspective is at the detriment of examining the specificities of individuals' experience. In addition to demonstrating how gender is

achieved through interaction rather than existing *a priori*, a constructionist approach allows for examination of the discourses and common-sense narratives that individuals draw upon to make sense of their experiences, and their discursive effects both on the individual and the organisation or scenario (Alvesson, 2003; Gill, 2000; Kelan, 2008; 2009; Nikander, 2008; 2012)

3.2. Discursive research and gender

As noted in the previous chapter, early research on gender in the workplace and organisations relied on treating men and women as two stable and comparable categories (Alvesson and Billing, 2002; Cameron, 1995; Haraway, 1998; Kelan, 2008a; Speer, 2005), taking a gender and organisations perspective (Calas et al., 2014). This uses methodology that directly compares women's and men's experiences and behaviours, starting from the point of view that these subjects are already constituted; stable categories that can be assessed, the members of which are treated differently because of their gender. In contrast, gender scholars (particularly those using gendering organisations perspectives) (Calas *et al.*, 2014) have highlighted the need to understand gender as constructed within and by specific situations, and examining the 'dynamic processes of gender' (Kelan, 2008: p. 40). These dynamic processes can be examined using methodology that acknowledges how gender is 'done' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or 'performed' (Butler, 1990). The former takes an ethno-methodological (sometimes more simply referred to as sociological/social) perspective, while the latter takes a discursive/poststructuralist (psychological) perspective; reconciling these two perspectives provides a useful framework for studying gendered phenomena.

West and Zimmerman's ethno-methodological approach argues that gender, rather than being an ascribed individual trait (Poggio, 2006), is a process, redefined and negotiated in everyday practices and interactions (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Mavin and Grandy, 2011; Kelan, 2010). Individuals do gender according to their social perceptions regarding the existence of (two) gender(s) and the differences between them (Kelan, 2008a: p. 42). Individuals therefore perform gendered acts related to appearance, dress, demeanour and interaction ritual, which they perceive as appropriate for these normative conceptions of sex categories (West and Zimmerman, 1987), in order to make themselves into an appropriately gendered person and avoid *accountability* for failing to fit into these categories. For West and Zimmerman, the gender binary is constantly reaffirmed by individual performances of gender, which reinforces the two sex categories, and reaffirms and builds a repertoire of gender(ed) activities and doings (Kelan 2008a: p. 43; Kelan, 2010; Mavin and Grandy, 2012). This

perspective is useful because it suggests that gender categories are made stable and natural through (repeatedly gendered) interaction, and that the performance of gender is socially mediated and monitored; methodologically, it necessitates an examination of how gender is done in practice, rather than a presumption *a priori* of two stable categories.

One criticism of West and Zimmerman's approach has been their strong position on the gender binary, stating that gender is unavoidable: 'because gender is important we have to enact it' (Kelan 2008a: p. 45), and by enacting it we make it important. The potential for change in their perspective is only considered on a societal level: gender has to be made less important, but individuals are not able to challenge gender norms within individual interactions. This has since been challenged, by those who argue that gender can be 'undone', through individuals not referring to or avoiding gender binary; by using different language; or actively reducing gender differences (Butler, 1990; 2004; Kelan. 2010; Mavin and Grandy, 2011; 2012; Risman, 2009). Building on these assertions of gender being 'undone', Mavin and Grandy (2011; 2012) argue that gender can be re-done, or done differently, particularly within certain workplace contexts where gender is made significant, through individuals engaging in gendered scripts congruent with their sex category (such as the exotic dancers: see Mavin and Grandy, 2011) or incongruent with their sex category (such as in the case of women leaders, Mavin and Grandy, 2012). The authors note that 'at the heart of such an approach is multiplicity, whereby women (or men) can do gender differently through simultaneous, multiple enactments of femininity and masculinity, and as a result it may open up new possibilities for unsettling gender binaries over time' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012: p. 221).

Another similar perspective on how gender is 'done', but one that acknowledges in more depth how the individual can challenge gender norms (Kelan, 2010) comes from a poststructuralist and discourse theory perspective, drawing on Foucault (1969; 1976), most commonly attributed to the work of Judith Butler (1990; 2004). Similarly to the ethno-methodological approach, Butler argues that 'gender is always a doing' (Butler, 1990: p. 25); however, for Butler gender comes from

'performativity', within which the subject becomes gendered by discourse; the 'plausibility [of gender] is constructed discursively' (Kelan, 2008b: p. 184). Drawing on Foucault, Butler points to the regulatory nature of discourse. Discourses render certain subjective positions available and legitimate, while others are marked as unintelligible through their non-adherence to social norms (Butler, 2004). Non-conforming to gendered norms is therefore possible in a way not covered by the ethno-methodological approach; gender can deconstruct and denaturalise the discourses that maintain it. Butler argues that when the subject refuses to perform gender in a way readable to a normative framework, the subject is 'denied existence' (Butler, 2004: p. 48) or faces 'punitive consequences' (Butler, 1990: p. 139), but not that the performance of non-normative gender behaviour is impossible. The value of the poststructuralist approach to gender is also its acknowledgement of how notions of identity can be 'felt' by the subject. Discourses act as regulative processes, which constitute and produce acceptable identities, and are then internalised by the subject as a sense of identity. In this way it offers space to the psychological processes occurring in gender performance, which are missing from the ethno-methodological approach.

While both perspectives on gender are useful for understanding gender as a doing, process, or as something that is constituted through interaction or action rather than as an *a priori* category, neither is satisfactory alone; to address only one would be to tell the gender 'story' incompletely (Kelan, 2008a). The actor is neither fully agentic, able to adopt and reject gender norms at will, nor determined entirely by these gender norms (Morison and Macleod, 2013). A more useful framework uses aspects of both: looking at how the subject produces norms, and how the subject is produced by discourses (Kelan, 2008a). Seeing gender as a doing is particularly important in industries where we may expect to see differing gendered scripts being adopted, such as in the case of women (entrepreneurial) leaders (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; Nadin, 2007; Patterson, 2011). This research thus responds to Mavin and Grandy's assertion that 'exploring how women do gender well, in congruence with sex category, while simultaneously doing gender differently, may provide a lens through which

to reveal some of the hidden aspects of gender and the critical role of the gender binary in sustaining existing norms, practices and values' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012: p. 223).

3.2.1. Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis has been demonstrably useful in gender research (Kelan, 2008; Gill, 2000; Scharff, 2010; Gill, 2000; Riley, 2005), precisely for its ability to draw together ethno-methodological ('discursive practice') and Foucauldian ('discourses in practice') perspectives on gender (Gill, 2000), and for conducting research that moves beyond gender as a category, and sees it as a doing or performance (Kelan, 2008a; 2008b).

Discourse analysis is a 'wide-ranging and slippery' (Taylor, 2001a: p. 8) term that has been utilised by a broad range of researchers and authors across a multitude of disciplines and perspectives. Indeed, Gill suggested in 2000 that there are close to sixty different kinds of discourse analysis (Gill, 2000), and it is likely the number has increased since. Although broad, perspectives of discourse analysis are characterised by a social constructionist epistemology and challenge to positivist paradigms (Parker, 2012; Taylor, 2015); an interest in language, talk and texts; and a view that language and discourse are constitutive, rather than simply reflective or representative of practice (Alvesson, 2003; Gill, 2000; Kelan, 2008; Nikander, 2008; 2012; Potter, 1997). The prevalence of discourse analysis in part represents the prioritisation of talk, language and linguistics in society (Gill, 2000; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) and the linguistic turn in the social sciences (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000a; 2000b; 2011; Rosenau, 1992; Taylor, 2015; Wetherell, 2007). It also provides a lens for understanding the lived 'doing' or on-going accomplishment of social worlds; the wider social forces that inform or guide talk and its consequences (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003), and what discursive effects it can have as a (re)production of social meanings (Nikander, 2012).

A significant proportion of qualitative social research relies in some capacity on the analysis of people's talk or discourse (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Wooffitt, 2005). The research interview is one of the primary methods of social research, eliciting various kinds of data for analysis: the interviewees experiences, accounts, conversations, narrative, arguments, conversation, descriptions ideas, or themes (Alvesson, 2003; Bryman, 2008; Silverman, 2003), which will be analysed to give the researcher a way to examine non- discursive topics or themes. Treatment of talk as it emerges in interviews can be treated in a range of different ways. It has been argued that there are two principle positions on research interviews: neopositivism and romanticism (Silverman, 1993) although recent analyses have sought to move beyond this distinction, offering 'localism' as a third principle, and advocating for more principles and perspectives on interviews (Alvesson, 2003).

Neo-positivist perspectives are those in which the interviewer will seek to collect facts or information from participants about their personal states, their experiences or their observations (Roulston, 2013; Alvesson, 2003) and views the interview as a way to gather a truth. A grounded theory approach, developed by Glaser (Glaser 1978; 1998) and later developed by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss, 1987; Corbin and Strauss; 2008) is a key theoretical grounding for this treatment of interview data:it sought to apply training in quantitative methodologies to qualitative research, exploring and analysing inductive data in order to develop theory that is 'grounded' in the data (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013). In a grounded theory approach, analytical questions are asked of the data during the coding process, assessing what actions and statement are illuminated in the data, what categories they relate to, and asking 'how does the research participant act and profess to think and feel?' (Charmaz, 2006, p.51). The researcher will then assess which codes that are most significant or frequent and use these to develop hypotheses or theoretical positions. These perspectives frequently adopt a quantitative and/positivist perspective, and emphasise the importance of objectivity and neutrality.

In contrast, 'romantic' perspectives on interviews emphasise the interview as a social interaction, and centres rapport with interviewees as a key aspect (Alvesson, 2003). The interviewer seeks to elicit confessional or personal reports through engendering a 'genuine' connection with their participants, and an underlying belief that eliciting deeper or more personal talk will necessarily reflect greater 'truth' (Roulston, 2013). This perspective was a key part of feminist research principles, which challenged the notion of the interview as a neutral tool for data collection, and argue that the interviewer should work to establish commonality and rapport, and build a non-hierarchal relationship with interviewees (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984). The aim in this kind of interviewing is to encourage the interviewee to be a 'productive source of knowledge' (Hostein and Gubrium, 1997, p.121) by stimulating and harnessing their own interpretive capabilities (ibid., p122). Analyis of talk in this context move away slightly from the neo-positivist perspective with regards to methodology, rejecting the need to have a neutral, positivist structure and methods; however they still largely treat talk as representative of either an inner or 'out-there' truth to be uncovered in the interview setting.

A third perspective, a localist (Alvesson, 2003) or constructionist (Alvesson and Billing 2009; Roulston, 2013; Symond *et al.*, 2000) perspective, such as discourse analytical perspectives that are discussed below, are those that treat the interview as a socially located event, and analyses how this event is constructed through talk. This challenges the interview as a direct instrument of data collection, and instead studies talk as the object in itself (Silverman, 2003). There are a number of epistemological positions that will adopt a constructionist perspective; discourse analysis, conversation analysis and narrative analysis (expanded below) are all variants of this perspective, which treat the talk as the primary subject. Similarly, in ethnographic research, although observational and field notes are likely to be the forefront of the analysis, they too will often use interviews and analyse talk (Roulston, 2013; Gubrium and Holstein, 2013). Analysis of talk in ethnography could adopt any number of theoretical positions to analysing talk, but is likely to adopt one that acknowledges how the talk is used within its (cultural) context. The kind of approach to talk will

therefore depend on the theoretical grounding of the research, what meanings the researcher is aiming to get from the data, and their perspective on what constitutes meaning (Roulston, 2013).

While few are rooted in theoretical perspectives such as grounded theory, the majority of qualitative research into women on boards utilises an approach to talk that treats the interviews as a way to examine phenomenon outside the interviews. Many conduct interviews on specific topics and, using thematic analysis for instance, and take the commonality of themes as evidence for the phenomenon the research is examining. For example in Sheridan and Milgate's (2005) research on women who hold board roles, the interviews were analysed for existence of 'success factors', and those factors discussed most commonly – such as having the right experience– are presented as the most important. This approach treats language as a static, neutral system for presenting information, or an unproblematic representation of reality (Alvesson and Karrenman, 2000b). Similarly in her ethnographic work, Holgersson (2012) utilised thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with recruiting directors and boards, identifying commonalities and themes, and presenting these as representative of real occurrences. Although illuminative in understanding suitability and acceptability factors, this presents a dilemma for her as a researcher when addressing accounts that she interprets as being 'untrue' or inconsistent. If taking such an approach, inconsistent talk has to be treated as representing inconsistent behaviours or beliefs, rather than locating the inconsistency within the interview setting.

Conversation analysis, which draws on an ethnomethodological approach as outlined above, was one of the first methodological standpoints to challenge this and foreground the situated nature of interaction. It examines the sequential organisation of interaction, starting from the perspective that conversations are made up of turn taking: each person in the conversation takes turns in talking and that this follows established patterns and norms (Wooffitt, 2005; Bryman, 2008; Kelan, 2008). There are slots in interaction where certain actions or activities are appropriate or expected: when one person states their name it is expected the other will respond with theirs, for instance (Sacks *et*

al.,1974, see also Heritage, 1988). Conversations are therefore comprised of utterances that form actions and that invite a particular range of interactions, forming a structure or architecture of expected interactions (Wooffitt, 2005, see for example Sacks *et al.*, 1974). Conversation analysis therefore seeks to examine how 'intelligibility of behaviour is created through the sequential organisation of language' (Kelan, 2008, p.43; Heritage, 1988). Conversation analysis has been used for gender research, and has been demonstrable useful for our understanding of how gender is done in interaction (Weatherall, 2002; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2003) for instance in the finding that men are more likely to interrupt women and to dominate conversations (West and Zimmerman, 1975). While useful, methodologically conversation analysis presents a challenge for researchers due to its reliance on and centring of naturally occurring data, rejecting interview data as an unnatural interactional setting (Woofitt, 2005). It has also been criticised for a lack of clarity about where social norms come from, they are formed in the way individuals enact them, but it is not clear where they originate. Its focus on the interaction as the sole area of study can deliberately, but problematically, negate discussions of context (Kelan, 2008; Wooffitt, 2005).

Discursive researchers – those that conduct discourse analysis – also examine discourse as a topic in its own right; they way that language is used, what it is being used to do, and the implications of that usage. Discursive scholars reject the notion that language is a transparent, neutral descriptive tool (Edwards, 1997; Wetherell *et al.*, 1987), and are concerned instead with discursive effects: how language is used to 'do things; to order, request, persuade and accuse' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: p. 32), and how it constructs and organises our 'reality': our social identities, meanings, and facts (Tonkiss, 1998). The process of using linguistic characterisations to describe something has a constitutional effect: it is through 'differentiating, fixing, naming, labelling, classifying and relating – all intrinsic processes of discursive organisation – that social reality is systematically constructed' (Chia, 2000: p. 513). Gill (1993) provides an example of how this occurs in her work on gendered ideologies: she notes how her interviewees discursively account for sexist practices and provide explanations for the (sexist) status quo, whilst simultaneously working to ensure that they (the

individuals) are not perceived as sexist. Here, language is used to justify and uphold the way things are, while also reflecting the interviewee in a positive light and maintain their positive self-identity and external identity. Similar discursive effects are observed in Holgersson's (2012) research on the appointment of board directors; although she does not explicitly use discursive methods, she notes how appointing Chairs will insist in interviews that they are gender-neutral in their selection of new directors, whilst describing gendered models of success that lead to a preference for men. A discursive approach can therefore be used to understand individuals' perspectives, analysis of how truths become established, the ideologies that underpin their discourses, and draw inferences about how their sense-making affects how social situations are maintained and (re)produced in their accounts.

Discursive researchers critique the notion that language can be used as 'mirror' of reality (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000b; Fairhurst, 2009: p. 1608; Hardy *et al*., 2005), or that by reading or analysing an individual's talk we can somehow gain information about a hidden or *a priori* internal self or 'personness' (Taylor, 2015). It therefore critiques the cognitive orientation of social psychology, which assumes that cognitive processes drive behaviour, and that these processes can be understood through experimental techniques or through analysis of peoples discourse (Wooffitt, 2005). This distinguishes it from a psychoanalytical framework wherein individuals are presumed to have 'biographically unique 'reality' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: p. 38) that can be elicited by asking questions (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 2000; Potter and Edwards, 2001; Wetherell, 2007).). That is not to say that discursive research is disinterested in the person who is saying the words or their internal or psychological reasoning for saying them, but that viewing words as representative of inner phenomena implies that there is some inherent 'truth' that can be discovered. Discursive research similarly challenges the idea that people's talk can be used to understand the 'truth' of events or occurrences (Wetherell, 1998). Rather than analysing talk and text as representative of something else 'out there' or within the individual therefore, it takes language as a focus in itself (Gill, 2000).

Alvesson and Karreman (2011) argue that this makes discourse analysis methodologically useful. Isolating an observable phenomenon (namely, text) to examine minimises both 'speculat[ion] about people's intentions, ideals, states of mind and other non-observable phenomena' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2011: p. 1123) and the problems associated with presuming that an individual's account of an event is an accurate representation of what occurred. This is not to say that research is best served by examining the observable, or that there is no benefit in examining internal or psychological states or attempting to speculate on their existence; rather, that discourse analysis can gain rigour by focusing on observable empirical data. Lack of interest in uncovering 'truth' makes discourse analysis powerful, by its awareness of its own limitation.

3.2.2. Resources

Looking at the above kinds of analysis, the typical methodological framework used in research into women on boards is thematic: analysis looks for the existence of pre-existing theoretical or conceptual ideas, and repeated existence of these themes is taken as evidence for their existence. These patterns would be related to either an external social cause or some internal psychological motivation (Wetherell, 1998) or both. Conversation analysis, by comparison, studies how social and conversational organisation is accomplished through talk, through analysis of (naturally occurring) talk. This therefore necessitates the study of conversation, for analysis of how participants 'employ general, abstract procedures to build the local particulars of the events they are engaged in' (Duranto and Goodwin, 1992, p. 192). Analysts will therefore look for the procedures and conversational practices such as turn taking, sequences of talk, and occasions where talk deviates from expected talk (Wetherell, 1998; Wooffitt, 2005).

Discourse analysis by constrast has been described as the search for patterns in language 'as used' (Taylor, 2001): examining both the commonality of patterns and their discursive function. Descriptions of phenomena, feelings, occasions or incidents draw on a varied but finite set of

discursive resources (Wetherall, 2012: p. 465) that act as a source of meaning and association. These 'common-sense' structures (Edley and Wetherell, 1995) 'units of sensemaking' (Edley, 2001; Kelan, 2009) or *interpretive repertoires* (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Potter, 1988) are defined primarily by being felt as common sense and taken for granted in peoples accounts, rather than necessarily based on logical or evidentiary reasoning (Edley, 2001; Taylor, 2006).

The concept of interpretive repertoires comes from Potter and Wetherell's assertion that a range of accounts of the same phenomena – whether by one person over a series of occasions, or a number of people regarding the same occurrence – will contain the same 'relatively internally consistent bounded language units' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherall and Potter, 1988, p. 171). These are the building blocks that speakers have available to construct versions of phenomena – whether describing their behaviour or cognitive and affective processes. They are culturally familiar and habitual lines of argument comprised from recognisable themes, common places and tropes (doxa) (see Potter and Wetherell; 1988; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell *et al.*, 1987). Doing discourse analysis therefore reveals what is taken for granted and common sense; what understandings, theories, and ideologies participants have and use while they evaluate and rationalise the situations they are in (Wetherell, *et al.*, 1987).

The presence of an interpretive repertoire will often be identified by the use of a certain trope or figure of speech – seemingly common sense and widely understood – which will be used to relate to other ideas and contexts. The interpretive repertoires that individuals draw on in their talk therefore make up the shared knowledge and what is regarded as "common sense" in a society (Edley, and Wetherell, 1995, Taylor, 2015). By analysing these interpretive repertoires and how they are used, discourse analysis aims to explore what is common sense (and made common sense) through individuals' use of language. It also, by the same measure, allows us to explore what is (made) nonsensical, through examining what discourses are absent or silenced in people's talk. It is necessary to analyse the discourse, repertoires and ideologies that inform talk, because they are constitutive;

they construct objects, entities or processes that acquire an objective status through their usage (Wooffitt, 2005).

3.2.3. Longitudinal discourse analysis

A final important principle of discourse analysis particularly important for understanding how it might be utilised in longitudinal research is the acknowledgement that discourse is occasioned (Kelan, 2008a; Gill, 2000): what people say is rooted in its specific context, and informed by wider social forces. This perspective acknowledges that people are routinely inconsistent in their behaviours, accounts and opinions, and are constantly 'flexibly adjusting their responses according to perception of the context, and a large variety of interactional and self-presentational goals' (Wetherell *et al.*, 1987: p. 60). Gill (2000) presents an illustrative example: If I am asked what I did last night, the answer I give will vary depending on who is asking, the context of the interaction and how the question is asked, even if all accounts are (as much as they can be) a 'true' representation of what I did last night. It is not that one account is deliberately duplicitous and another is 'truthful', but that the person's response is specific to the context and situation, and what the action orientation of the words is (Gill, 2000).

These inconsistencies are often observed even within single interactions. Particularly in gender research, it has been revealed how interviewees may contradict themselves several times even within a short section of talk (Riley, 2005), something discursive scholars are likely to acknowledge; taking the inconsistencies as the object of study, and using it to draw inferences about the context within which they are using it. Kelan (2008a) notes that 'as accounts can vary wildly, variation means that the functions of discourse can be evaluated only in relation to specific contexts' (Kelan 2008a: p. 54). When examining the incoherent nature of people's accounts (Wetherell *et al.*, 1987), discursive scholars take the inconsistencies or variability as the object of study (Wetherell, 1998), rather than

presuming that inconsistency is problematic or representative of interviewees fabricating their accounts.

While a focus on inconsistency and a treatment of discourse as 'occasioned' makes discourse analysis useful for analysing accounts in context, it can present a problem with how to treat consistency. Under an ethno-methodological perspective, consistency is understood as interaction ritual (Goffman, 1963); while in discursive research they are primarily treated as learned, tacit or continued methods and norms (Wetherell, 2003) mobilised within the interactional occasion; both perspectives reject consistency as representing an inner or external 'truth'. In analytical frameworks that do not see treat talk as occasioned or contextual (thematic analysis for example), repetition of similar themes within accounts are often treated as (quantitative) 'proof' for their existence or as representing truth; the number of times a theme is present is taken as (more) evidence for its existence.

This framework is the most prevalent in women on boards research: for example, Vinnicombe and Singh (2008) conclude that the appointment process is becoming more rigorous because Chairs state that it is; consistency is regarded as support for the phenomenon. From a discursive perspective, the repetition of this statement would not be regarded as noteworthy; consistency does not necessarily mean that the Chair 'believes' it is more rigorous, or that if all Chairs state it, it is representative of 'fact'. Instead, a discourse analysis focuses on what this assertion is being mobilised to 'do'. Stephanie Taylor argues, however, that discourse analysis can and should acknowledge that accounts and narratives persist and are repeated 'across particular moments of social instantiation or constitution' (Taylor, 2015: p. 14), and that this has to be acknowledged, without offering support for a psychological perspective that sees the individual as having an inner 'true' self to be uncovered. The acknowledgement of repetition and consistency is highly valuable when conducting longitudinal research, as cases where interviewees repeatedly use consistent discourses across interviews with a significant gap between them require specific analysis, rather than treating each interview as occasioned and specific.

This limitation to discourse analysis when used in longitudinal research design can, Taylor argues, be addressed in part by utilisation of aspects of narrative analysis. In narrative analysis, people are regarded as storytellers, and interpreters of narrative (Currie, 1998; Plummer, 2000). Scholars in this area therefore take the story, narrative or anecdote that is being told as the object of investigation (Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis is concerned with how people interpret and reflect upon phenomena, and how they construct an inter-subjective account to do so (Leiter, 1980; Brown *et al.*, 2009); people structure their accounts of experiences by drawing upon frameworks that allow them to make sense of events, whilst maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception (Brown *et al.*, 2006; Weick, 1995). This draws on two areas of theory: impression management (Goffman, 1959) and attributional egotism (Miller and Ross, 1975; Straw *et al.*, 1973). Narrative analysts see how individuals make sense of an experience as implicitly connected to their sense of identity and self, and their need for 'self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency' (Brown *et al.*, 2006: p. 1040; see also Eerez and Early, 1993). While discourse analysis acknowledges that an individual has 'self-presentational goals' that will affect the interaction and its context (Wetherell *et al.*, 1987: p. 60), narrative analysis places greater emphasis on individual *identity* construction, generation and maintenance (Brown *et al.*, 2008), and how the individual makes his or her self 'look good' through their story-telling.

Drawing on aspects of narrative analysis along with discourse analysis, Stephanie Taylor (2006) and Taylor and Littleton (2006) advocate the use of a narrative-discursive method. For Taylor, both narrative and discourse analysis both neglect the *rehearsed* nature of talk, which, she argues, 'is part of the extended process through which identities are constructed and taken up' (Taylor, 2005: p. 48). Taylor (2005) argues that both can be made more relevant and useful by considering how discursive meanings may persist through '*multiple* interactions within a single lifetime' (Taylor, 2005: p. 47, my emphasis). This builds on the consistency (and inconsistency) that Wetherell highlights in a micro, turn-by-turn perspective, while also acknowledging the cumulative factor of

previous identity tellings (Taylor, 2005; Davies and Harre, 1990). This is important because discourse analysis, in its refusal of a psychological basis for motivations and its focus on the occasioned nature of talk, can neglect the *repetitive* nature of people's narratives.

A narrative-discursive method is also particularly useful for analysis of contexts where individuals are going through periods of change or flux, and are utilising their narratives to make sense of this, creating and utilising 'new *version[s]*' (Taylor, 2005: p. 48, emphasis in original) of old stories. The life (or career) story is therefore particularly suited to this method, as this is 'one of the most significant narratives of a speaker's life […] told and retold, reinterpreted and reshaped for different situations' (Linde, 1997: p. 283). Taylor's (2006) research on people working in the creative industries similarly examines:

> [h]ow a version of a life story functions for a speaker in a particular interaction, for example, to support a claim to an identity […] and how understandings prevailing within the wider society facilitate or constrain such identity work, for example, because of the "trouble" a speaker may have in reconciling it with other identity claims or positions given by his or her life circumstances. (2006: p. 25)

By drawing these perspectives together, the narrative-discursive focuses both on the meanings of talk in a wider, social context, while also considering how these contexts persist and are repeated through multiple interactions, but without resorting to psychological, psychodynamic or psychoanalytic approaches that essentialise the self or the subject (Taylor, 2005). This opens up space for addressing the rehearsed nature of talk, through understanding an individual's tellings and re-tellings of 'who-they are' (personal anecdotes, for example) as a pool of local resources, that they draw upon in multiple interactions within a lifetime (Taylor, 2015). Attending to these repetitions allows space for acknowledging a place for continuity and consistency: 'conceptualised in terms not of some enduring essence, but of re-used resources and the (partial) repetition of performance on

successive occasions' (Taylor, 2015: p. 15). Placing less focus on the psychological antecedents to narratives, acknowledging the existence of repeated discourses, while still placing emphasis on the social and cultural implications and limitations of people's narratives, therefore provides a framework for utilising discourse analysis longitudinally.

3.3. Methods and Methodology

Approaches to understanding how directors are appointed and the differences between men's and women's experience have frequently drawn on publicly available data or interviews with current directors, to make inferences about how and why directors were chosen. There has been relatively little research conducted that gains the perspectives of individuals as they are going through the process of seeking board roles.

One explanation for the lack of research in this area is the difficulty of establishing a relevant sample: aspiring directors are difficult to access, particularly given the opacity around how directors are chosen, the reliance on networks, and their elite position. This is also noted by other researchers: sampling in studies of elites is notoriously challenging (Bushell, 2015; Gaughan, 2013; Hill, 1995; McDowell, 1998; Ortner, 2010). These individuals are traditionally difficult to access; are presumed to be more likely than others to consider their time precious; and may be less motivated to be part of a research study (Richards, 1996; Berry, 2002). In his research into the social organization of boards and directors, Hill (1995) found that access to these individuals proved extremely difficult. This, he notes, actually demonstrated evidence for the existence of the elite: a great deal of significance is placed on personal recommendations and networks to gain access. He noted that the process of attempting to gain access to these individuals became as important as the research outcomes themselves in understanding how boards and board members construct their existence as a hard-to-access 'elite'. Hill (1995) also noted the crucial role played by gatekeepers when accessing board members; many of his candidates came through one or two key individuals, usually CEOs or Chairs, whose powerful positions meant that the board members felt obligated to participate. Such people are particularly appropriate for research where the sample community is elusive and there are no official sites where they can be accessed (Sturgis, 2008).

For this reason, the research partnership with Sapphire Partners, a search firm that specialises in executive search, board appointments and consultancy on the recruitment and retention of senior

women (Sapphire Partners, 2015) was a key factor in the research design. Other, similar research studies (Bushell, 2015; Gaughan, 2013; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005; 2015; Vinnecombe and Singh, 2005) have primarily relied on the researcher(s) having their own connections to members of the business elite; the connection with Sapphire Partners as a gatekeeper and advisory role therefore facilitated research conducted by an 'outsider', something that is difficult to conduct in research on elites. Aspiring directors are also a notably difficult population to access; while directors are publicly known once appointed, those seeking roles are relatively invisible, particularly given the opacity of the process and of search firm practices (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009; 2012). In this research, working with an executive search firm to gain access to candidates made it possible to access aspiring directors.

3.3.1. Research design

The aim of this research was to provide an in-depth, gendered, discursive analysis of the non-executive director appointment process. Drawing on the women on boards literature and other relevant areas as outlined in the literature review, and the epistemological literature regarding gender and discourse, the research questions were as follows:

1) How do aspiring directors discursively construct the 'ideal' board member?

2) How do aspiring directors use their networks to gain visibility and access to board 'gatekeepers'? How do they make sense of their networking practices?

3) How do aspiring directors make sense of the appointment process, and account for their success and failure?

These three research questions formed the basis for the research, which sought to contribute to a better understanding of the board appointment process, how the process is gendered, and to place both the appointment process and the women on boards agenda into a wider social context.

In-depth, qualitative interviews have become a prominent method of data collection within the social sciences, and when examining gender (Bryman, 2008). Poggio (2006) argues that for research attempting to grasp gender as fluid, procedural and based on tacit knowledge, the most appropriate tools are ethnographic studies or interviews. This is due to their ability to capture how gender is 'said and done' (Bruni *et al.,* 2005; Martin, 2003; Scharff, 2010). Qualitative interviewing has thus become the 'paradigmatic feminist method' (Kelley *et al.,* 1994: p. 34). Interviews are also highly appropriate for research that utilises discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), narrative analysis (Brown *et al.,* 2008) and narrative-discursive methods (Taylor, 2005) because they provide ample opportunity for individuals' discourse to emerge in the interview process, through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Hammersley, 2003). In such constructionist approaches, interviews are understood as interactive, co-productive practices, in which knowledge, discourses, meanings and narratives are not merely revealed, but jointly created by the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013). They allow the contradictions, consistencies and inconsistences, and different subject positions to emerge in talk (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Hammersley, 2003). In-depth interviews therefore provide a rich data source for understanding the experiences of aspiring directors, the appointment process, and how it is gendered.

Extant research into women on boards and the board appointment process that uses interviews or qualitative research methods has primarily been conducted with current board members (those who have already 'made it'), who are asked about the appointment process retrospectively, often in fairly broad terms (see, for example, Burke, 2000; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005). Such research is limited in its scope for two key reasons: first, it is retrospective, and therefore reliant on individuals' 'interpretation of the past through the lens of the present' (Mason, 2011: p. 31); it therefore neglects the processual nature of boards appointments as something that can take months or years (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Sealy *et al.*, 2013). Second, it restricts research findings to only those directors who have

been successful. Given that the appointment process is opaque, difficult to navigate and often characterised by barriers (Doldor *et al.*, 2012), the accounts of people who are not successful offer a valuable contribution to our understanding of how individuals navigate the process. Longitudinal research of aspiring directors therefore allows space for the voices and accounts of unsuccessful candidates, accounting for 'deviating' or 'negative' cases (Mason, 1996; 2011; Charmaz, 2001) but without categorising them as 'unsuccessful' candidates before the research starts. It instead takes a contemporaneous and fluid perspective on success and failure, allowing candidates to describe it in their own terms, congruous with a constructionist methodological approach.

As well as accounting for the processual nature of the appointment process, longitudinal research also allowed the research to be contextualised within this specific period of time, and its prescience in relation to the women on boards agenda. At the time of the research starting (September 2012), the women on boards agenda in the UK was ongoing: the gender target had been set in 2011, and by the end of the research (December 2015), the target had been met. Retrospectively, longitudinal research over this time can therefore be regarded as an assessment or artefact of this period, in a similar way to research that has examined the effect of quotas in other countries (Bertrand *et al.*, 2014; Matsa and Miller, 2003; Nielsen and Huse, 2010; Storvik and Teigen, 2010). During this period there was significant focus on the women on boards agenda and a rapid increase in the number of women appointed, more so than before 2011 (Davies, 2011; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012). This has not continued to the same extent in 2016 (Sealy *et al.*, 2016). Conducting multiple interviews throughout this period captured the effects of this change in public discourse, and attended to how candidates' responses relate to themes of time, (in)consistency and change (Hermanowicz, 2013; Saladana, 2003).

Gender and boards research has tended to focus primarily on women's experiences; qualitative research in this area has usually asked women directors how they gained their positions (Burke, 1996; 1997; 2000; Burgess and Theranou, 2002; Daily *et al.*, 2000; Holton, 1995; Mattis, 1993; Sheridan, 2001; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2000) and does not often include or compare them with

men's experiences (Sheridan and Milgate, 2005). Some studies that include men's experiences or perspectives (for example Vinnicombe *et al.,* 2000), or examined men and women's career profiles (for example Sheridan and Milgate, 2005) find them to be very similar; however, this also contrasts with women on boards research that emphasises the differences between men and women who make it onto boards. Overall there is inconsistency across the research findings as to whether women directors tend to be similar or different to men, in large part due to the focus being placed disproportionately on demographics, and measurable or observable characteristics, using gender as a 'unit of measurement' (Mason, 1996) rather than conducting in-depth analyses of gender differences. This research therefore sought to examine the experiences of both men and women, but utilising a gendered approach. Such an approach does not treat the groups of men and women as representing their gender; rather, it examines the discourses that emerge from both men's and women's accounts, and how they may be gendered.

3.3.2. Research sampling

This research sought to examine the experiences of aspiring non-executive directors, by following the experiences of fifteen women and fifteen men, aiming to interview each of them three times over the course of two years. A sample size of thirty (ninety interviews) was chosen in order to be large enough to gain enough data to understand the appointment process, while ensuring that the longitudinal aspect of the research did not make the project unmanageable or unrealistic within the timeframe of the project.

The research sought to speak with individuals seeking non-executive roles on FTSE 250 or FTSE 100 boards. This population was chosen for three reasons: first, the FTSE 350 represent the largest and most powerful companies in the UK, and their directors therefor fall into the 'wealth elite' (Savage, 2015), making this research design applicable for understanding boards as an elite population, more so than might be observed in smaller companies, private, family-owned or AIM-listed companies. Second, the women on boards agenda in the UK was primarily focused on the FTSE

350, and the initial gender target was set for the FTSE 100 (Davies, 2011).[14] Similarly the Female FTSE reports (Sealy *et al.*, 2007; 2008a; 2009; 2016; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012; 2013; Vinnecombe *et al.*, 2010; 2014; 2015) have routinely highlighted the gender balance on FTSE 100 boards, latterly focusing on FTSE 250 boards. Third, these companies are covered by the UK corporate governance code (FRC), stipulating that companies should use external search firms or open advertising for their board appointments (FRC, 2016), meaning that the appointment process at this level are often presumed to be more rigorous (Doldor *et al.*, 2016). The contradiction between boards being members of an elite (often characterised by opaque recruitment processes) and the FTSE 350 being presumed to be more rigorous, provides an interesting population for examination.

One of the inevitable challenges of conducting longitudinal research to examine the board appointment process 'as-lived' was ensuring interviewees could, hypothetically, be successful in gaining board roles, and therefore would provide insight into the appointment process. While the aim of the research was not to choose only candidates who would be successful, it was also important to select candidates who *could* be successful, to ensure that the process they went through over the course of three years would lead to their involvement in many stages of the appointment process. This is another area where the partnership with Sapphire Partners was valuable, as they were able to advise on the kinds of individuals typically seeking board roles, and make suggestions for the sampling frame.

As noted in the earlier review of the literature, an individual's industry background is often presumed to affect their chance of being appointed (Sealy and Doherty, 2012) and a predictor of board gender diversity (Brammer *et al.*, 2007; Sealy *et al.*, 2012; 2013). It was therefore important to ensure that the men and women in the sample came from a range of industry backgrounds. While the intention of this sampling frame was not to view individuals as representative of their sector, it was

[14] In July 2016 a new target was set, expanding to cover FTSE 250 companies, and re-setting the bar to 30% women by 2020, but this was after the research period.

important to ensure data was not skewed through only sampling from one or two sectors, or from an overrepresentation of men or women from certain backgrounds. In the initial design for the research, in collaboration with Sapphire Partners, an intended sampling frame was established. Of the thirty interviewees, ten (four women and four men) were sought from financial backgrounds; four (two women, two men) from professional services; four (two women, two men) from industrials; two (one woman and one man) from retail, operations, technology, human resources; and four 'wildcards' i.e. candidates from atypical backgrounds or who do not fit into the other categories (see Appendix I).

To establish a sample, I used a purposive or theoretical sampling method (Mason, 2011), choosing interviewees in a strategic way to be relevant to the research question (Silverman, 2011). Cases were selected for their suitability to be illustrative, and 'illuminate and extend relationships and logic among constructs' (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: p. 27). This is in line with a constructivist approach that is particularly suited to discourse analysis; not concerned explicitly with the sample being representative of a demographic category, but aiming to collect data sufficient to examine the discursive phenomena of interest (Nikander, 2012). While the demographic categorisation of gender and industry was an important part of the sampling process, it was only referred to in the data where it was relevant to the discourse that emerged, seeking to avoid presenting individuals as representative of their demographic, something that can be an unavoidable part of biographical research (Taylor, 2012).

3.3.3. Finding aspiring directors

Particularly when conducting research on elites or on specific, hard-to-reach populations, it is often easy for researchers to talk 'blandly' about establishing access, and 'letting the reader assume that the particular […] respondents were the optimal or ideal for investigating the particular issue' (McDowell, 1998: p. 2135). McDowell notes that often in these cases, in order to reaffirm notions of rigour and unbiased sampling, researchers downplay occasions when sampling depends on 'luck and chance, connections and networks' (*ibid*.), which is particularly the case in elites research where the population is more elusive, and in the case of aspiring directors where there is no clear location and space that they occupy. In this research, while I had at the start of the research constructed a clear sample frame and target, the reality of gaining access and establishing a sample was far messier and more difficult, and highly reliant on luck and chance, connections and networks.

Similar to other research into elites (Hill, 1995; McDowell, 1998; Sturgis, 2008), establishing the sample for this research meant in part relying on Sapphire Partners as a gatekeeper, followed by word of mouth and recommendations utilising a snowball sampling technique (Mason, 2011). The process started with an initial list of potential candidates recruited through Sapphire Partners, who sent the recruitment letter (Appendix IV) to potential candidates on my behalf, chosen from their database or networks. The letter made it clear that participation was anonymous and that Sapphire Partners would not be informed of who had volunteered, and asked individuals to contact me directly if they would be happy to participate.

Building on those, in the first interviews I asked interviewees to recommend and suggest others, particularly men, who were underrepresented in the initial recruitment list from Sapphire Partners. When a potential candidate was identified, I sent through the recruitment letter via email, with a brief explanation of the research. This was kept fairly uniform across interviewees, but with adaptions depending on how the candidate had been introduced. I also attended a number of women on boards events and established contact with other headhunters and researchers in the field as part

of the sampling process, although almost all interviewees were from the initial request from Sapphire Partners, or through people these individuals recommended to me. Snowball sampling can be problematic if it results in a small sample that is skewed or unrepresentative of the population to be studied (Atkinson and Flint, 2001); however, it was notable that, while many of the candidates knew each other and referenced others in their interviews, this also happened between individuals who were introduced by different people or recruited in different ways. Interconnectedness is therefore representative of the relatively small pool of potential candidates and their connections (see for example Fracassi and Tate, 2012; Carpenter and Westphal, 2001) rather than representing population bias due to snowball sampling methods.

In order to support theoretical sampling, participants' eligibility for the study (i.e. ensuring they could hypothetically gain a board role) had to be established prior to the first interview. When they volunteered. I replied to arrange a time for the first interview, and ask them to send me their CV. Given that they are seeking board appointments, this information would, on their achieving a position, become public information on company websites and in the various databases of board directors; it was therefore unlikely that the participants would find this request unusual or intrusive, and none refused, although some directed me to their LinkedIn profiles. While this information would ordinarily be sought through a screening questionnaire or similar (Mason, 2011; Bryman, 2008), the seniority of these elite interviewees made this inappropriate, and could have produced a poor sample due to the time commitment required to complete it (Gilbert, 2008).

Initially, the research design, recruitment letter, information sheet and consent form stated that the research was looking for people who are 'seeking non-executive director roles on FTSE 250 or FTSE 100 boards'. Describing them as 'seeking' board roles presented the appointment process as an active and deliberate 'search', much like a job search. This conceptual framework had a detrimental effect on the sampling, as often candidates (particularly men) were reluctant to admit that they were 'looking' for board roles. One of the first interviews I conducted with one of the men in

the research troubled this description: whilst he was going through processes and events that I would have categorised as 'search' for positions, (and that were similar to female candidates' 'search' narratives) he did not see himself as 'actively seeking' board positions. Instead he, and other men, frequently described themselves as hoping to be appointed, or 'vaguely looking'. In an early discussion with a headhunter from another of the major search firms, I was advised to change the wording of the documents to reflect this, as she felt that men rarely described themselves as 'looking' for roles, recommending that I change the focus to ask for those 'considering taking on board roles'.

The final sample comprised thirty interviewees: ten (five women and five men) were from financial backgrounds; eight (four women, four men) from professional services and legal firms, four (two women, two men) from industrials, and two each (one woman and one man) from human resources, retail, technology, and from advertising and marketing (See Appendix I). All interviewees had held senior roles in large businesses in the UK, and advice was sought from Sapphire Partners to ensure that candidates were of a sufficient seniority or experience level to be considered to have a good chance of being successful. The changes in the sample frame in relation to industry background were in large part due to the reliance on 'luck, chance, connections and networks' (McDowell, 1998), and in part due to candidates falling into a number of industry backgrounds. I also removed the 'wild card' category included in the initial research design, to acknowledge that the category 'wildcard' is a term used by headhunters to refer to candidates that are not easily categorised into an industry background. While this is not in itself problematic, many candidates discussed the detrimental and punitive effect they felt being referred to as a wildcard by headhunters had on their chances. For this reason, the industry categorisation was broadened to include advertising, marketing and legal – advertising and marketing as its own industry and legal as part of professional services – which would have been included in the wildcard category in the initial design. Again, this follows McDowell's (1998) suggestion that researchers be more honest about relying on networks, chance and serendipity: given that these candidates volunteered, I did not want to turn them down on the grounds of their backgrounds, nor did I feel it appropriate to label them as wildcards.

The interviewees were not asked their age as part of the interviews, but using estimates, information from their CVs and occasions where they referenced their age, they ranged between 38 and 70 years old, with the women being generally slightly younger than the men. For comparison, in a wider survey research into aspirant directors completed as part of this project (see Brown *et al.*, 2015), their average age of aspiring directors was 53 for women and 56 for men. Most of the interviewees were considering board roles as part of their decision to retire (or due to an enforced retirement age of 60 or 65 in their roles, in the case of those in professional services firms), so the average age was higher than the survey – at around 62 years old. All interviewees were white, and all

but three were British. Many mentioned having children – most commonly teenage or in their early twenties, who were often discussed in in relation to me and my age, or to their discussing having children going to university. One woman had two young children who she discussed as part of her career narrative and this formed part of her motivation for seeking board roles. Several of the women mentioned being childless; many interviewees did not mention their children. All interviewees hold University degrees from a range of universities, but there was no clear overrepresentation of elite universities. Several also had MBAs or Master's degrees, or other qualifications (the Lawyers had legal qualifications, for example). All except two were based in London or the South East of England, and the two that did not live in this area travelled to London for work on several days a week.

Qualitative, longitudinal research requires a high level of commitment, which may put potential candidates off (Bryman, 2008). Participant retention is therefore a key consideration for longitudinal researchers (Hermanowicz, 2013), and often requires a great deal of work on the part of the researcher. Establishing and maintaining rapport is an important part of longitudinal research: in order to maintain candidates' cooperation in subsequent interviews (Apted, 2008; Hermanowicz, 2013) by keeping in touch with candidates in between sessions and establishing rapport over a long period of time (Apted, 2008). Retention was high: one participant withdrew after the first interview by declining the second interview, as her personal circumstances had changed and she was no longer looking for board positions; her data was therefore excluded from the sample. One interviewee declined the third interview due to time restraints but did not withdraw his data, so was included in the research overall.

3.3.4. Interview design

In preparation, I designed an interview guide to frame the interviews, drawing on the themes emerging from the literature review and the three research questions as outlined above. This utilised Lofland and Lofland's (1995) recommendations as to how non-standard interview guides should be designed: outlining 'puzzlements' (1995) in the topic, exploring what is interesting or unexplained, and building

a picture of the most important research questions. Concepts were amalgamated to establish the most relevant, placing the emerging themes from extant research into three categories for further exploration, taking micro, meso, and macro aspects of the appointment process. Micro aspects referred to the individual-level characteristics of the candidates and their perceptions of the ideal board member; meso-level aspects were candidates'candidates' networking practices and connections with other people; and macro aspects included their experience and perceptions of the board appointment process overall, and the wider social discourses around the process (see Appendix V). I aimed to discuss all three areas in all three interviews with candidates; however, the structure and flow of the interviews varied from interview to interview.

The interviews started by asking the interviewee to introduce their career background and to explain their motivations for seeking director roles, followed by more detailed questions around the three topics. The order that I asked the rest of the questions varied from interview to interview, and was largely based on how the interviewee responded to the first question and where they were in the appointment process. I took cues from the on-going dialogue about what to ask next and how to expand on the points most relevant to the interviewee (Mason, 2011). This flexibility allowed the wording and order of the questions to be adapted to the participants' answers through the interviews (Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Simmons, 2008); it also helps to develop rapport with the interviewee and gain a fuller understanding of the individual experiences (Mason, 2011; Fielding and Thomas, 2008). This was particularly important for longitudinal research, as subsequent interviews required more specific adaption to the individual interviewee. While the first interviews followed a fairly similar structure, the second and third interviews were much more varied, as they covered a broader range of occurrences, and also became less formal.

3.4. Preparing for the interviews: 'PhD Barbie' gets a makeover

In addition to preparing for the interviews through designing the interview guide and establishing the sample (although this process occurred in tandem with the first round of interviews), I also went through personal preparation for conducting the interviews (Brown, 2016; Elias *et al.*, 2016). This was in part on the advice of my supervisory team and Sapphire Partners: at the outset of this research when interviewing to take up the PhD position, concern was raised that my appearance and demeanour may not be 'professional enough', and that this would be an issue when conducting research with corporate elites. I was therefore encouraged, before undertaking the interviews, to undergo what can be theorised as a kind of researcher aesthetic labour (Warhurst *et al.*, 2001; Witz *et al.*, 2003; see also Elias *et al.*, 2016).

The success of qualitative interviews (particularly if understood as 'conversations with a purpose') (Mason, 2011) relies on the interviewer and interviewee establishing an interactional 'working consensus' (Goffman, 1959) by performing their appropriate identity. Methodologically, this is more commonly discussed in terms of building 'rapport' (Mason, 2011) as a way of ensuring the interviewee feels at ease (Birch and Miller, 2000). This is particularly the case with feminist research, which foregrounds the need for interviewers to attempt to equalise power relations in the interview by encouraging collaboration and mutual disclosure (Sinding and Aronson, 2003). It follows that aesthetic labour in this context might mean dressing to make the interviewee feel comfortable rather than dressing authoritatively; however, these power dynamics are upended when the respondents have a higher status than the interviewer, as is the case when researching elites (Conti and O'Neil, 2007). In this case, interviewers often have to work to uphold their legitimacy and be taken seriously (Conti and O'Neil, 2007), and this may require dressing professionally or authoritatively.

Although aesthetic labour has been discussed in a number of industries, it is rarely identified in methodological literature as required for academic research (Brown, 2016; Donaghue, 2016; Spry,

2001), despite personal appearance and the body being an inevitable and unavoidable part of the research process (Spry, 2001) where the body is 'the main commodity or tool of the trade' (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006: p. 776). Similar, aesthetic labour is bound up in aspects of emotional labour; emotional labour has been identified as an important part of qualitative research, and particularly interviewing (Carroll, 2013; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009; Holmes, 2010), due to its reliance on face-to-face engagement, and incitement to rapport building, mutual disclosure, emotional intelligence and awareness, and building common understanding with participants (Carroll, 2013; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009; Holmes, 2010). By similar reasoning, aesthetic labour can be considered an important part of the role of the researcher, particularly when researching and engaging with a population that have specific rules of dress and appearance (Brown, 2016), and when understanding interviewing as a necessarily embodied practice.

I have written elsewhere (Brown, 2016) about the experience of undergoing aesthetic labour for research and its implications; however it is important to note here, in terms of its relevance to the research that the process of aesthetic labour was necessarily bound up in my gender, age, and (lack of) professional status. While I am white-British, able-bodied, middle-class and well-spoken (all traits that are aligned with normative expectations of professionalism) (Witz *et al.*, 2003), of 'acceptable appearance' (Mears, 2014), and, to an extent, privilege, I had come straight from my Bachelors and Master's degrees into the PhD, and I grew up in an old Welsh farmhouse with feminist, artist (read: 'hippy') parents. As a result, I had high levels of cultural capital, low economic capital, and (crucially) little experience of professional environments or professionalism.

Aesthetic labour has been observed in professional environments: employees are expected to dress and behave in line with corporate expectations and ensure they have the correct appearance, to 'get in and get on' in organisations (Witz *et al.*, 2003: p. 42). This commonly falls under the label of professionalism (Collier, 1998), where norms are maintained through cultural expectations about what is presumed to make an individual successful. Professionalism is best exemplified in the (male)

suit, which allows the wearer to become neutral, rendered invisible in professional environments (Entwistle, 2000a; Hollander, 1994; Kelan, 2013); however, this means that norms of professionalism for women are much less clear-cut, and women require higher levels of aesthetic labour to be deemed professional. Although professionalism is often primarily related to clothing, it also includes embodied elements such as mannerisms, demeanour, and voice (Sinclair, 2011). This is particularly the case at senior levels, where men and women are expected to display leadership qualities that are more frequently aligned with masculine traits (Kelan, 2013).

There is a great deal of advice offered to women about how to align their appearance with professionalism (Entwistle, 1997; Kelan, 2013), and a trend towards personal consultancy and training in this area, such as the existence of image consultants or presence coaches (Hewlett, 2014; Masciave, 2014). Given the concerns that had been raised regarding my professional appearance, and the potential risks of maintaining legitimacy when conducting research with elites (Conti and O'Neil, 2007) I undertook sessions with an image consultant, who agreed to see me *pro bono* as support for the research. She works with senior-level executives in helping them to develop their 'executive presence' (Masciave, 2014), displaying traits such as gravitas, confidence, poise and decisiveness (Hewlett, 2014) and having the correct appearance and self-presentation, all of which she covered in the sessions with me. She also taught me how to 'dress-for-success' (Entwistle, 2000a) and to present myself professionally, a process that (in addition to wearing the correct clothing) also meant concealing traits that might mark me as 'unsuitable' for professional environments, such as my "messy appearance", "flushed skin" and "energetic presence" (see Brown, 2016; Masciave, 2014). Undertaking these sessions, as well as preparing me to undertake the interviews, offered an insight into how the norms of professional dress are described and recanted by 'experts', and how discourses are brought into play around what is deemed acceptable in terms of professionalism. Reflecting on the process of aesthetic labour and conducting research with elites was also an essential part of researcher reflexivity, bound up as it was in my gender, age and different-profession to my interviewees.

3.5. Researcher reflexivity

Conducting constructionist and discursive research necessitates recognition that the interview is an interactional exchange of dialogue, and that data is co-produced between the researcher and participant (Alvesson, 2003; Cassell, 2005). How reflexivity is actually 'done' is often not explained, and instead 'being reflexive' can become a get-out clause: something researchers claim to do without explaination (Alvesson, 2003; Cassell, 2005). Reflexivity and recognition of the role the interviewer plays in the construction of data also means, as Alvesson (2003) argues, moving beyond a romantic stance that over-emphasises the positive effects of interviews,[15] and instead reflexively broadening our understanding of what the interview consists of and the different functions the interview setting may play.

A well as a 'tool' for data collection, a research interview may be a site for local accomplishment; the perpetuation of assumptions; identity work; the application of cultural scripts; impression management; political action; and play of the power of discourse on the part of the researcher *and* the researched (Alvesson, 2003). The reflexive interviewer must be consciously aware of the multiplicity of forces at work in the interview process (Mason, 2011; Gubrium *et al.*, 2012; Bryman, 2008; Silverman, 1993; 1997), how roles are developed in the interview setting as a result of differing power dynamics (Cassell, 2005; Bhavnani, 1991), and acknowledge the implications of this for what is said in the interview and treated as data. This reflexivity will also occur throughout the thesis when it relates to the data and data collection process; however, I also explore some specific themes here, particularly given that (hyper)awareness of how myself, my demographic category, appearance, body and mode of interaction had already occurred before the interviews were conducted through the aesthetic labour in preparing for the interviews, and underpinned much of the research process.

[15] And critiques neo-positivist, realist stances that see the interview as a neutral tool for data collection (Alvesson, 2003).

3.5.1. Power in interviews

Understanding the research interview as a conversation with a purpose (Mason, 2011) or a co-production of knowledge (Alvesson, 2003) also means understanding how it relates to differing power relations (Alvesson, 2003; Kvale, 2006; Tanggaard, 2007). The simplest understanding of 'power' in the interview context refers to the extent to which the participant or interviewer is able to control or guide the interaction, or to influence the other's speech or actions (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013). Traditional interview methods, particularly those that draw on positivist, neo-positivist (Alvesson, 2003) or post-positivist (Cassell, 2005) paradigms, allow the interviewer to hold a position of relative power in the interview setting: they set the agenda for the interaction, guide the discussion to the topics they wish to cover, and decide when it starts and finishes (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Kvale, 2006; Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013). In this formulation the interviewee can only exercise power through choosing what and how much they want to reveal (Corbin and Morse, 2003); explicitly or implicitly refusing to answer the question posed to them (Conti and Neill, 2007); or attempting to lead the conversation away from the interviewers' agenda (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Mason, 2008). Even when they do, the researcher is still seen as having the control over the interaction as a whole.

The principles of feminist research have challenged this: they state instead that the researcher holds a position of power and can exploit research subjects, as it is a one-directional process where data is extracted. Interviewers do not offer anything in return, and it thus operates as an overtly hierarchal relationship (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984). Feminist methodology instead encourages the interviewer to seek to establish rapport, reciprocity, and a non-hierarchical relationship with interviewees (Davies, 2000; Oakley, 1981), subverting or transforming the researcher's power by encouraging collaboration, transparency and/or mutual disclosure (Aronson and Sinding, 2003).

As a self-defined feminist researcher conducting interview-based gender research, I aimed to uphold these principles in my research design. However, this is difficult when conducting research on elites, which is frequently characterised by the interviewer's relative lack of power in comparison to their interviewees: the 'normal asymmetry of the interview is reversed' (Hill, 1995: p. 248). This complicates the negotiation of power dynamics in the interview, challenging some of the principles of feminist research, which assume *a priori* that the interviewer can (or, ironically, has the power to) reverse the power dynamic, by utilising techniques such as mutual disclosure (Conti and Neill, 2007). Particularly in the case of women interviewing women, on which much of the feminist principles of research are based, it also presumes commonality or empathy between the interviewer and interviewee is achievable, something that will be affected significantly by their identities. demographic categories, such as gender, age, sexuality, race, class, professional background, ability and linguistic style, all of which play a role in mediating their social relationship (Arendell, 1997; Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013).

One of the most significant demographic fault-lines along which power can be wielded (in interviews) is gender (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2003). Early feminist research methodology often presumed that women interviewing women (i.e. where the interviewer and interviewee 'match along gendered identities') (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013: p. 496) – will engender mutual understanding or reciprocity, challenge power dynamics, and make for equal and non-exploitative interview interactions (Oakley, 1981; Davies, 2000; Reinharz and Chase, 2003). This has since been challenged by those who point to the need for an intersectional approach to power and interactional dynamics, to be aware of the differences between women and how these mediate power relations (Ikonen and Ojala, 2007; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002).

Linda McDowell (1998) for example disagrees with the feminist position that the commonality and empathy built between women in interviews makes them a pleasant, mutual experience (see Oakley, 1981); by contrast, the women in the banking industry that McDowell

interviewed were 'extremely forceful and clearly had little time or desire for a sisterly exchange of views' (McDowell, 1998: p. 2137). She notes that much of the methodological (gender) literature that discusses roles and power consists of researchers interviewing people relatively similar to them (McDowell, 1998, as is the case in much of the women on boards research. (See for example Gaughan, 2013; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2004; Bushell, 2015). Feminist research has also examined the power imbalance that can occur when women interview men. Men have been noted to actively exert control over the interaction through (for example) sexualising, belittling or testing the interviewer (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001); performing masculinity and heterosexuality in a threatening or controlling way (Pini, 2005; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001); actively positioning themselves as more knowledgeable than the interviewer (Pini, 2005); or taking control through questioning or instructing the interviewer (Arendell, 1997). Although all are related to a patriarchal model of male dominance, the latter are particularly pertinent in studies of elites where the interviewees may assert that they know more about the issue than a researcher.

Over the course of the interviews, I noted very few cases where power was explicitly or forcefully wielded, where interviewees were threatening or controlling, or where I felt they were actively seeking to undermine my power in the interview; however, power dynamics were still notably at play throughout. One surprising area in which this emerged was where interviewees were perceptively keen to be (seen as) being 'helpful': wanting to 'help' (rather than 'participate' or 'contribute'), discursively locating the research as something they could offer their support to by being interviewed. Watts (2006) found a similar occurrence in her research into elites, where often the desire to help the researcher with her doctoral studies seemed to be 'sufficient credential in itself to persuade them of the intrinsic value of the study' (Watts, 2006: p. 37). Although not problematic in terms of motivation for participating, this manifested in the interviews through statements such as: "I'm sorry, this isn't really relevant to your research" (Linda, first interview); "Sorry I realise this doesn't fit in with the research" (Gary, second interview), or Danielle, who started the first interview by saying: "Well, I don't know how helpful I can be; I might have blown your statistics" because she

had recently been appointed to a (non-FTSE) board. In this case the discourse of 'help' meant the interviewee gaining control of the interview at the start, by deciding or stating (without my input) what would be most helpful or useful, potentially 'shutting down' or closing off the interview before it had started.

This also necessarily relates to age, which is a key factor in interview interaction and outcomes (Ikonen and Ojala, 2007; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002; Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013); depending in part on the age difference between the researcher and her participants, they may be seen as a novice, expert or confidante (Parker, 2000). Many interviewees acknowledged the age gap in the interviews, either implicitly through referencing their daughters (never their sons, highlighting again the intersection between age and gender), or in explicit comments such as: "You wouldn't be old enough to remember" (Stephen, second interview). At times, being treated as a novice made me feel relatively powerless or patronised, while at others it felt like an advantage: it made it unquestionably clear that I had no personal experience seeking board roles. This gave me leeway to ask naïve questions (Ikonen and Ojala, 2007), or deliberately present myself as an 'ignoramus' (McDowell, 1998; see also McDowell, 1992; Schonenberger, 1991), letting the interviewee play the role of 'expert'; it also meant I did not threaten the individuals own success as I might have if it seemed I would personally benefit from the research results. Playing this role could be seen as a way of negotiating the power dynamics positively and turning them to the advantage of the research, particularly given that my age and gender could not be concealed (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013)[16].

That said, Sapphire Partners' role as a gatekeeper organisation will have impact, not only on the individuals' likelihood of participating, but on how I would be treated and perceived (Adams and Magaw, 1997; McDowell, 1998). It was notable that some interviewees may have interpreted my

[16] No matter how hard I tried…

connection to Sapphire Partners as potentially increasing their visibility with the headhunter, even though they were told that Sapphire Partners would not be aware of who participated. One woman emphasised during the interview that the only contact she had received from Sapphire Partners since introducing herself to them was the request to participate in the research, something she raised as 'proof' that headhunters are elusive; this may also indicate that her motivation for participating lay in a belief that it would increase her chances of being successful. In other cases candidates explicitly listed the research among their networking practices, suggesting that participating may give them visibility. Similar to McDowell (1998), I also have to acknowledge that while some paths were opened to me because of my gatekeeper and other connections, others may have been closed. For example, while I could access other headhunters and many were happy to discuss my research, they were reluctant to help me recruit because of my connection with a competitor.

Longitudinal interviewing is especially susceptible to power dynamics between the researcher and participants (Hermanowicz, 2013), as one of the accomplishments (Alvesson, 2003) I needed to achieve in each interview was ensuring the participant's cooperation in subsequent interviews (Apted, 2008; Hermanowicz, 2013). This meant that there were occasions on which I was (more) concerned with ensuring I built and maintained rapport with the interviewee in each interview than I might have been in snapshot research. It also resulted in a perceptible changing of roles and dynamic throughout the research: often methodological research can treat the roles of interviewer and interviewee as static and fail to account for their fluidity and contested nature (Mason, 2012). Over the course of the research I got more skilled and more confident conducting the interviews (and better at dressing professionally): perhaps to be expected, but difficult to control for (McDowell, 1998). I also became more knowledgeable about the women on boards context (as one would expect from conducting PhD research, perhaps) and in some cases this resulted in being treated more as an expert or insider: those interviewees that had not been successful in their search often asked for advice or wanted to know how their experiences compared with others'.

3.6. Conducting the interviews

This research project ran from September 2012 to September 2016, and the interviews were conducted between April 2013 and April 2015. I had planned to conduct the interviews in waves: undertaking the first interview with all interviewees in April 2013, the second six months later, and the third six months after that; however, due to the long lead time on establishing the sample, the interview times were staggered throughout the two years. To ensure the initial research design was not compromised, I interviewed each individual three times during that period, ensuring the interviews were between three and nine months apart. This allowed sufficient time to examine and understand any change in circumstances from one point to another (Hermaocwitz, 2013), while also completing the research in time.

To ensure participants were not inconvenienced, they were given the opportunity to suggest where the interviews be held. In the initial round of interviews, the majority were held at the Department of Management at King's College London or at interviewees' offices (if they had them); however, in subsequent interviews it became more common for the interviewees to suggest less formal spaces, such as coffee shops or restaurants in central London. All except one participant were interviewed three times during this period. Two interviews were conducted over the phone, but I met face-to-face with all interviewees at least once. The interviews ranged between thirty to ninety minutes, and were audio recorded with the interviewees' permission.

Interviewees were informed that they did not have to give permission for the interview to be recorded (see Appendix III), and could request any part of the interview not be recorded, or request a section be excluded from analysis. Nobody refused the recording, but there were times when they would make statements such as 'you [had] better not record this bit' or 'don't quote me on this bit', which were therefore excluded from analysis. This was most commonly used when referring to individuals or companies to ensure anonymity.

Ethical research considerations were taken into account to protect both researcher and participants (Seale 2008; Gilbert 2008). These considerations cover a broad spectrum of practices: at its simplest this required ensuring no physical or psychological harm came to myself or the participants, gaining their informed consent to participate, protecting their anonymity, and respecting their right to withdraw from the research. More broadly, ethical research must take account of the effects the research and researcher may have upon the participants (and, indeed, the researcher), and if the outcomes of the research will have any lasting negative effect on the subject's rights and integrity as human beings (Gilbert, 2008). To ensure their informed consent, interviewees were issued with an information sheet (see Appendix III) in the initial invitation email and encouraged to ask questions. This gave them information around the aims, themes and structure of the research, informed that their participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to give a reason. The consent form was signed at the beginning of the first interview, and consent assumed granted from that point onwards. As the project is longitudinal it was also important that right to withdraw and informed consent were re-established at each stage (Mason, 2011). The arrangement of the second and third interviews was taken as indication of continuing consent to participate (see Appendix III),

Interviewees were given a pseudonym and all interviews, CVs and related field notes were labelled with the pseudonym. Because the research is longitudinal it is not possible to anonymise the interview transcripts completely until all data has been collected; personal or identifying information about the participant or other people they discussed was included in the initial interview transcripts, but removed from all academic work (including conference presentations, data sessions, teaching and publications) by using pseudonyms for the participant, others they discuss, and any organisations or companies. A document tracking which pseudonym matches each participant was stored separately from the data, and all files are password protected. Consent forms and other identifying information were retained only for the length of the study. Interviewees were also informed they could withdraw their data from any time before 1st April 2015, after which time the document that indicates which

pseudonym relates to each individual will be permanently deleted, making individual contributions anonymised and untraceable.

3.7. Analysing the data

The interviews were professionally transcribed, using an adapted version of the Jefferson system of transcription notation (Jefferson, 2004; Hepburn and Boden, 2013, see Appendix VI). This is particularly useful for discourse analysis due to it capturing *how* things are said, as well as what is said. While transcription can act as a useful first stage of analysis (Gill, 2002), the number of interviews (resulting in more than ninety hours of interview data) would have been highly time-consuming alongside conducting the interviews and on-going sampling; by seeking professional transcription, greater time could be allocated for analysis of the data. On receiving the interview transcripts from the transcriber, I started the data analysis by reading through the transcript and listening to the recording. This allowed me to correct any mistakes, and to address areas where the transcriber could not clearly hear or understand what was being said; this was particularly common when interviewees used acronyms that the transcriber was not familiar with (such as NED – often pronounced 'ned', or FTSE – pronounced 'footsy'). There were also occasions where the interview recording was unclear, but I could decipher more easily having conducted the interviews.

This processing also acted as an initial stage of analysis; I took analytical notes while going through the transcripts, highlighting any particular areas of interest, and combining these with research notes I had taken during the interview. This can be understood as an important first stage in doing discourse analysis: familiarising myself with the data (Gill, 2002). For each interview, I highlighted key broad themes as they occurred in the interview, in particular where interviews discussed aspects of the three research areas and making notes on how they were used, as well as noting other emerging themes or areas of relevance. I also produced a thematic and content overview for each interview, which provided key points about the interview: where it had been held, any reflections on my experience, background to the interviewee such as how they had been recruited and if they were connected to any other interviewee, and an overview of the stages they had been through in the search for board roles. This could be used as a prompt for informing subsequent interviews,

and in second and third interviews this also summarised what, if anything, had happened since the previous interview. At this stage the transcripts were also all anonymised.

After this stage, I printed the interviews and conducted a second round of analysis by hand, this time organising categories of interest and 'coding' the data (Gill, 2000). I followed Gill's (2000) recommendation of a two-stage process of discourse analysis: first, I searched for patterns in the data, identifying where accounts varied, where they were consistent, and where there were silences or notable absences (*ibid*.). As discussed earlier in the chapter, discourse analysis has been described as the search for patterns in language in the form of 'common-sense' structures; interpretive repertoires (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) that individuals draw on in their talk to make sense of their experiences. In practice, this means identifying where individuals refer to ideas, themes or explanations that are either explicitly or implicitly taken for granted or common sense, and where these same line or arguments occur across different interviewees' accounts or contradict in their accounts. I also identified thematic areas and groupings of interpretive repertoires; ideas or presentations of ideas that are referred to in the analysis as discourses. Although the term discourse is highly contested and debated, in this research it is used to relate to those broader ideas that interpretive repertoires relate to, and that have discursive effects. It also means examining language 'as used' (Taylor, 2001): addressing both the commonality of patterns and their discursive function. The second stage (although the stages frequently occur in tandem) involves examining the function of discourse, what words are being mobilised to do, persuade or project, and what the effects of this presentation are. This latter stage can be, as Gill notes, neatly summarised in the question: 'Why is this utterance here?'(Gill, 2000).This treats their discourses as objects of study in their own right, not as evidence for an inner truth of an individual speaking, or of the event they are describing.

Due to the longitudinal research design, identifying patterns and functions of discourse also meant drawing attention to where accounts varied and were consistent between individual accounts, and between multiple interviews with the same person. This meant in practice treating the data in two

ways: first, treating all ninety interviews as separate, discrete entities and as a single dataset (cf. Taylor, 2012: p. 394), and identifying recurring discourses and discursive features. This kind of analysis was advantageous because it allowed me to begin analysis alongside conducting interviews, and to outline how research themes emerged in interviewees' discourse; it also meant conducting discourse analysis on a relatively large number of interviews. A second stage then involved analysing the interviews after they had all been conducted, and looking at how discourses were adopted by individuals in subsequent interviews; comparing their first, second and third interviews with each other, and examining the consistencies and inconsistencies between them. This stage of analysis therefore treated repeated patterns and consistencies as 'local resources': a personal or pool of repertoires, anecdotes or rehearsed talk, contributed to by wider contexts, by the individuals' own talk and, crucially their *repetition* of these resources. Where interviewees repeat an account across interviews for example, can therefore be conceptualised as their re-using these resources, acknowledging consistency as part of the process through which identities are constructed, enacted and taken up, rather than as representing the existence of an essential psychological 'self'.

As described in the sampling process above, the interviewees could be categorised according to their gender and industry background. Similarly, the longitudinal research design also meant that (once all data had been collected) it was possible to categorise individuals into those who had gained roles and those who had not. It was however, as noted above, important that the data was not treated as a comparison between discrete and static categories, and instead focused on how the discourses are used in, and emerge from, the data. To reduce this impact, during analysis I removed the categorisation in attempt to distance myself from the categories (removing names from transcripts, for instance). In many cases I could remember the interview (and my embodied experience of the interview was also part of the analysis), which helped to make the familiar, strange (Gill, 2002) and to examine the discourses 'as used', rather than as representative of an individual, an industry, or a sex category. When I then drew together interview extracts that drew on similar discourse themes in

the third stage of analysis, I brought these demographic categories (sex, industry, interview number, success with board roles) back into the analysis, and this allowed me to examine where there were commonalities.

After analysis by hand, the transcripts were imported into the qualitative data software Dedoose[17], which allowed electronic collation of the themes and sections of transcripts that related to it, and easy categorisation of each interview with relevant demographic markers. This process required going through the hand-written analysis and transferring it into the online software, necessitating a re-examination of the transcripts and further honing of coding and emergent discourses. When moving to the writing up stage of the project, I then exported extracts (organised by theme and discourse) into a table, and drew on these collations to begin writing, in itself part of the analysis process (Gill, 2002).

Overall, while the description of discourse analysis can make it appear linear and rigid, the process of analysis was a continued, iterative process (Edley, 2001; Bryman, 2008; Mason, 2012), that involved moving back and forth between micro analysis of discourse as-used and broader, macro or thematic analysis; demographic categories and more abstract or anonymised extracts; and from viewing extracts organized in themes to revisiting extracts in the interview transcript, to ensure the context (as presented in this thesis) was accurate. Although I had initially planned to analyse by hand, import transcripts into Dedoose and then work solely from there, I found the process was most successful when it involved moving between different analytical media. Throughout the research I used computer-assisted analysis, data tables, hand-written notes, and extended writing as processes of data analysis. In doing so, I identified the discourses that appeared most strongly (either those that

[17] This software was primarily chosen due to its portability: it operates as a cloud-based online programme and can therefore be accessed from any computer with the internet. This features data encryption and password protection – see www.dedoose.com

were numerically more common, were used to the strongest and most direct effect, or given importance in interviewees' accounts) within the three research themes.

This chapter has outlined the epistemology, methods and methodology of the research project, to explain how data was produced and analysed. This has highlighted the advantages of conducting discursive research, particularly when conducting gender research. It has also outlined the justification for this particular research design: conducting in-depth interviews with aspiring directors, and taking a longitudinal perspective, will contribute to our understanding of women on boards and the director appointment process, through examining how they conceptualise the ideal board member, how they navigate the appointment process, and the wider discourses they use to make sense of their experiences, and their success and failure. These discourses are presented in the upcoming chapters.

4. The Discursive Construction of the Ideal Board Member

This chapter explores how candidates' accounts discursively construct the 'ideal' board member: someone who has the 'right' experience, personality traits, and 'fits with the board'. It also argues that this construction locates directors within the corporate elite through emphasising their elite qualities, and draws on and (re)produces a meritocratic discourse. This chapter will show how constructions of the ideal board member emerge in candidates' accounts, how aspiring directors locate themselves in relation to the ideal, and how this is used to make sense of the process and their successes or struggles.

The construction of the ideal director contributes to and draws on two wider discursive frameworks: elite identity construction, and a smokescreen of meritocracy. Candidates emphasise the importance of having the 'right' experience and background, and it is presumed that the 'right' candidates will find it easy to become directors, while the 'wrong' candidates will not. These discourses allow individuals to position themselves as members of a corporate elite, and present the process as meritocratic and gender neutral. Meritocratic discourses are also (re)produced in the way that candidates foreground subjective criteria (such as having the right personality or 'fitting' with the board) as essential for a good director. This has the effect of locating highly subjective assessment criteria within a meritocratic framework; it also allows candidates again to emphasise their own elite status, which they do by locating their (highly individualised) subjective traits as essential to boards. In both cases the reproduction of a meritocratic discourse obfuscates bias, presents a defence against (gendered) critique, and provides a justification for the appointment process to operate in the way that it does.

The chapter will proceed as follows: first it will outline how having the right experience underpins candidates' motivations for seeking director roles; their narratives place high importance on specific kinds of high-profile experience, discursively presenting their career backgrounds to fit

with what boards are presumed to value. It will show how certain kinds of experience (particularly previous board experience) are seen as highly prized and useful when those individuals seek board roles. It will also outline notions of the 'wrong' experience, and how individuals with the wrong experience describe how they are discursively 'othered' through being labelled 'wildcard candidates'. It will further explore the personal characteristics and personality traits that they see as important to be a good director, how these are gendered, subjective and individualistic, and located within elite identity discourses. Finally, it will show how the emphasis on 'fit' emerges in candidates' accounts, and how this rationalises and defends the process of board appointments and discursively renders it objective, yet revealing subjective interpretations of what constitutes the 'ideal' board member.

4.1. Having the 'right' experience

When describing their reasons for wanting to become a director, candidates frequently referred to having the right experience and career background for the role, and drew on markers of elite identity and experience to do so. This emerged largely in the first round of interviews, when I started by asking interviewees to discuss their backgrounds and what had led to them wanting to be on a board. Sarah's[18] account below is typical of this kind of introduction.

> **Scarlett**: So, to start, can I just ask you about your career background, and how that led to you wanting to be on a board?
>
> **Sarah [first interview]**: Okay (.) so my working background and personal background; so, I am a 45-year-old woman, I have three young children under five, I am not married and I have worked for most of my career in [Company 1] (.) For much of the time that I worked there I ran the international online businesses, so my primary role was either as a Marketing Director or as a General Manager. [It was] expanding internationally (.) in some instances starting up businesses like the one we did in China. Then when I left there as (.) Well, a couple of points I suppose about that so in terms of seniority I got quite senior in the organisation, I became a partner, I won the Chairman's Award, for business transformation.

[18] All names throughout are pseudonyms.

> [Company CEO] only gives out seven a year, so they are fairly exclusive and highly sought after. Then I left there in 2008 to have my first child and whilst on maternity leave, [Company 1] re-organised and I was head-hunted to join [Company 2], as the Chief Marketing Officer, globally. I stayed there for a further two years. I sat on both the [Company 2] UK Board, sat on all the Boards of the businesses in all of the countries I was responsible for, so six different Boards. I chaired two of those as well and I sat on the main Board of the subsidiary boards. So I have got a very strong commercial background. Up until the point I worked for [Company 2] I'd pretty much always had revenue control and P&L control. I am used to running organisations of up to five hundred plus individuals, controlling budgets of half a billion US dollars.

To start, it is notable that Sarah's account (as was common with candidates' response to this opening question) describes her career narrative in such a way to demonstrate her ability to be a good director. It is notable in particular that although my question was posed to ask about her motivations and her career background, she responds in a way that highlights how she is well suited to board roles. Sarah's career narrative refers to a range of indicators or markers of her seniority and significance, and the language she uses to describe it sees her taking ownership over her success ('I ran'; 'I became a partner'; 'I won the…award') and marks her as a member of the business elite, emphasising the exclusivity of the award, for example. She also highlights her high level of responsibility: experience in senior business roles, revenue and budget control, P&L (Profit and Loss) experience, and the number of employees all act as specific high-profile indicators of her qualification for board work, and she emphasises how she was recognised for her ability in these roles. Overall, her narrative presents her as a highly successful businesswoman with a strong career background in board-relevant areas, who is a legitimate member of the corporate elite.

It was not common in many candidates' explanations, but the way that Sarah discursively treats her children and caring responsibilities is also interesting. While I might have presumed (given the evidence to suggest that women's children and caring responsibilities are problematic in an organisational context) that women would not discuss their children, it is notable that she started the

narrative by declaring her children and that she is unmarried, with the implication that they had affected her career or were a significant part of her identity or career story. They are then interwoven in the narrative: visible but also compartmentalised. Maternity leave is discursively combined with the company's reorganisation and her being head-hunted, downplaying the influence of her children or domestic situation in favour of business-led explanations. This could also indicate evidence of a kind of 'having it all' discourse and how women can draw on it to present themselves as highly successful (perhaps even more successful), by emphasising that she has achieved a long career and had children, while being unmarried. The domestic responsibilities are therefore adopted to emphasise her ability, while still maintaining a business focus to the narrative.

Although they came from a range of career backgrounds and their experiences were diverse, candidates also often used similar discursive repertoires to describe their careers and thus their suitability for board work. The aspects of their experience mentioned frequently reflected those found in the literature and discussed in the review of the extant literature: they emphasised their high-level business experience, leadership responsibilities and senior or director roles.

> **Scarlett**: If I can start with a [question]: really briefly, or as in depth as you like actually, just give me an introduction to you and your background, assuming I know absolutely nothing, how you ended up where you are, and how that led to you wanting to be on [a] board?
>
> **Bill [first interview]**: How I ended up where I am? I'm from [place], I went to [name] School, the local grammar school there, and then I went to Cambridge to read modern languages. I joined [FTSE 100 Bank] on their graduate programme.
>
> **Scarlett**: Right, yes.
>
> **Bill**: That was where I met Linda[19] actually, she was there. So I then had a career in banking. Sort of all of my career in banking. The last half of my career was at [global bank] where I worked in a whole range of different things. I lived in Hong Kong but I ran our North-East Asian business, which is, Hong Kong is our biggest business, and then essentially expanded our business into China. Then I came back to the UK and I ran our Africa[n] business. I was here for Africa; we have a very big business in Sub-Saharan Africa. I became what we call

[19] The interviewee he refers to had put him in touch with me, as discussed in the earlier chapter on methodology.

the CIO, Chief Information Officer, which is the head of Technology and Operations.

Scarlett: Okay, yes.

Bill: And I headed Strategy, went on the board of the bank, head of Risk and what we call the west side, I was the governance head of Middle East, Africa, Europe and America. So we divided the world in two, someone had Asia and I had the rest. So that's how it was really. I retired from there in 2010 and became - for a number of personal and career reasons, all very positive by the way, and I thought I'd pursue a more balanced 'plural career' as I call it. Non-executive. I had already become a non-executive director in 2005 of [company] which is a [place]-based London Stock Exchange-listed engineering company (.) They're international and very successful, actually.

Bill's career narrative emphasises his seniority of experience and elite roles: his career in banking, specialist industry background, global and international experience, and previous experience of governance and being in the boardroom. Like Sarah, Bill focuses on the roles that were C-suite (i.e. being CIO) and director level, and in doing so implies that these were valuable for moving into director roles; his motivation for seeking board roles is the fact that he has already held board roles.

Methodological literature on life history suggests that often interviewees present messy and inaccurate accounts of their lives, advising the researcher (and audience) not to expect that they will be neat or chronological (Dex 1991; McDowell 1998; McLean et al., 2012). In contrast, as McDowell (1998) found in her research into financial elites, these respondents are highly focused on their own career progression and they tell neat, chronological narratives regarding their career histories. The way these narratives are presented suggests that they are well-rehearsed, in part as part of their formal self-promotion, but also as part of informal impression management, where they use aspects of their career history to present themselves in the strongest light. The neatness also suggests their use as part of a repertoire: these are repeated, practised narratives that they are used to providing.

The perceived power of having the right experience, particularly previous board experience, was notably strong in those who had held the most senior roles in their previous careers. Stephen provided a very short answer to the opening question of the interview, and focused solely on being a

finance director for a FTSE 100 company.

Scarlett: So, to start, can I just ask you to give me a bit of information about your career background, and how it has led to you wanting to be on a board?

Stephen [first interview]: Okay, so forget all the early bits, but I've been on the board of [FTSE 100 company] as Finance Director since, well, Finance Director designate since the middle of 2005 and officially Finance Director since the 1st of January 2006.

Scarlett: Okay.

Stephen: ^so, I've been on the board eight years or so^ and about = in about 2011, I decided I'd like to take on a non-exec role.

In a similar (but redacted) way to Sarah and Bill, Stephen refers to his director experience and emphasises that he is a finance director for a FTSE 100 and that nothing about his career before then has any relevance to his suitability for boards. By doing so, he foregrounds his position as a member of the corporate elite and relates this to his motivation for seeking more director roles. This response is more direct and deliberately shortened than, for example, Sarah, whose description is more focused on pointing to how her broad experience fits into a board. It could also be argued that Stephen emphasises his elite status through his modes of interaction and the way he describes it: the fact that he is a finance director is deemed enough of an explanation. This results in him guiding the interview, stating that he is not going to discuss his career history by saying he will (or, perhaps, that I should?) 'forget the early bits', thus dismissing his early experiences as unimportant. This may indicate he feels being a finance director is enough of an explanation, but could also be seen as him controlling the function (Alvesson, 2003) of the discourse and disturbing the flow of the interview. He answers my question by immediately dictating what about the question he is *not* going to answer, and focusing solely on the (elite) role he currently holds.

In subsequent interviews, Stephen referred back to his role frequently, and alludes to its significance in leading to his success.

Stephen [second interview]: But you know, there aren't that many FTSE 100 Finance Directors who want to do non-exec audit committee chair roles.

Scarlett: No, absolutely.

Stephen: So I was kind of unique-ish, well unique, but in a select group, so that skillset is in demand.

Stephen's mention of his current role is again presented here in such a way to highlight his rarity, and indicates or reiterates a belief that he will be (or has been) successful because of it. This reiterates a belief in having the 'right experience'.

Scarlett [third interview]: So did you get any helpful feedback from the headhunters at that stage?

Stephen: Not really, they all said, you've just the right credentials for the chairman of audit committee, that you should, you know, find this (.) you'll find the right thing, just give it time.

Scarlett: And what was it about your credentials that they said was perfect?

Stephen: Well qualified (.) chartered accountant, finance director, multi-national company, executive, good reputation, no baggage.

Scarlett: Yeah, no, absolutely.

Stephen: And no skeletons.

Scarlett: Yeah.

In his third interview, Stephen again draws on the 'right experience' discourse, this time in relation to headhunters' feedback, which he presents as affirmation that he has the 'right' experience to be a director. When I ask him what that entails, he lists similar high-profile, elite markers of his experience: referring to the finance experience, his previous director role, international experience and executive status, casting himself as the ideal board member in these terms. He also mentions reputational aspects by asserting that he has a good reputation and no 'baggage' or 'skeletons' (presumably a reference to having 'skeletons in the closet', representing potential reputational risk). Both the visibility of directors and the importance of having a good reputation are common in corporate elites (Gaughan, 2013), particularly for directors of publicly-limited companies, which are largely in the public eye and have to be transparent about their directors' backgrounds (Grant Thornton, 2016). Taking the three interviews together highlights the durability of the 'right' experience discourse, and how it can be used across different occasions for slightly different discursive ends, but in all cases to emphasise that s/he is a high calibre candidate, who will, at some

stage, be successful.

The way that headhunters are utilised in candidates' discourses also suggests they have an effect on dictating and reproducing discourses around what constitutes the 'right experience'.

> **Linda [first interview]**: The feedback I've had from the search agents is, "Well, you know, your profile is very much in demand".

For those who felt they had the right experience, feedback from headhunters was a common way of asserting that in the interviews; as in this from Linda, they often stated that the headhunters described their experience as highly desirable for boards. Similarly, in the earlier extract, Stephen mobilises the headhunters' feedback in the interview to assert that he has the right experience; this treats the headhunter as an expert opinion and the interaction with them as an anecdote used to strengthen his discourse. This results in a kind of reproductive or cyclical truth effect where headhunters' narrow criteria and preference for certain kinds of candidates are used as an interpretive repertoire in the research interviews, and this perpetuates the idea that boards are only looking for certain kinds of candidates. By presenting their statements as evidence for their suitability for roles, the interviewee casts themselves as ideal candidates and give power to the headhunter to dictate the ideal (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009).

In a subsequent interview, Linda again draws on the right experience discourse to make sense of her success; she had, since the last interview been 'bombarded' (her word) by offers for boards.

> **Scarlett**: And what do you think it is about your experience or your personality – or your quick wit! that makes them?
>
> **Linda [second interview]**: I don't think it's any of that. I think I'm in a sweet spot at this point. I could probably be green and have a head like a cabbage and they'd still take me. They're after people with [risk experience] in financial services, because under CRD4[20] the

[20] The Capital Requirements Directive is an EU commission proposal and regulation, of which CRD IV is a part. Amongst other things, it requires that banking firms establish a separate risk committee of non-executive directors responsible for the overall risk strategy of the firm. Although there are no specific

majority of banks are being required to have a risk committee, they need people with risk experience. (.) If they can fill a quota for Mervyn Davies at the same time and have somebody presentable, then you're half way there. So for me, being a risk person and female.

Scarlett: And there's not a lot of you about?

Linda: There's not a lot of men about! (.) so that helps, I'm under no illusions.

Linda refers again to having the right experience, and specifically relates it to recent legislative changes and an increased need for candidates with risk and financial experience. This reflects discourses in wider society and the women on boards literature, which discusses the financial crisis and increased preference for those with financial backgrounds (Sealy and Doherty, 2012). It is notable therefore that here Linda draws on these discourses to assert her rarity, and states that she is so unusual in her background that she is in a 'sweet spot', and will, by inference, expect to find it easy to get roles. Most interestingly she connects this presumption that there is an increased preference for certain kinds of experience with a kind of market rationality: her discourse asserts that in order to fill legislative targets, boards are looking specifically for (female) candidates with a background in risk, which she argues makes her unusual and rare. This perception that it is easier for women is discussed at greater length later in the thesis, but it is important to note here how Linda uses it alongside the 'right experience' discourse to emphasise that she should find it easy to get roles.

This rarity draws again on the elite discourses discussed earlier, with candidates emphasising the seniority and specificity of their experience, locating themselves in an elite positions and emphasising the elite status of directors in general. This impression management (Westphal, 2015) upholds the rare, elite and exclusive nature of corporate board roles, while still maintaining an impression of the process as highly rational and led primarily by market forces.

4.1.1. Previous board experience

regulations that state these directors must have a background in risk, it is reasonable to assume people from risk backgrounds might be sought for these roles.

One specific kind of experience often discussed by candidates as being highly desired by boards was having previously been on a board, as an executive or non-executive.

> **Daniel [second interview]**: I forget who it was, it was a chap at [company name], the headhunters, they do a lot of FTSE non-exec work, very strong board practices, and he said: "The best way of getting a non-exec position is to already have a non-exec position". And it is kind of self-perpetuating: once people know you've been through the mill successfully and served out [a] full term with another company and it's a serious company, then you kind of pass muster. People who try to break into that world for the first time I think face a real problem.

The idea that 'the best way of getting a non-exec position is to already have a non-exec position' was a strong discourse through the research, and all interviewees drew on this discourse at some point, either in relation to their views on the ideal board member, or (as discussed in subsequent chapters) in relation to their success or failure (Brown *et al.*, 2015). This discourse is used critically: often interviewees would draw attention to the preference for previous board experience in order to criticise the process, acknowledging that it is difficult for new candidates.

> **Matthew [second interview]**: And then I talked to a bunch of headhunters, just sent my CV to people who were working in the NED space and they mostly were receptive, met with me, said they would be happy to put me up for things but actually very few have done anything.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah. That was going to be the next thing; about: I speak to a lot of people about their relationship with headhunters, and there's a very, kind of, tricky thing about whether or not they're either very, very useful or actually almost no use at all?
>
> **Matthew**: My experience is that once you have a couple [of director roles] and you are an easy shoo-in, they're desperate to talk to you. If they think they'll get repeat business from you, they're desperate to put you up and talk to you, but if you're new to the game, they won't include you unless they can't get any other names.

Matthew draws on this same interpretive repertoire to make sense of his experience of seeking roles, emphasising that he feels that he faces a barrier as a result of lacking previous board experience. Like Daniel, he attributes that to the headhunters' preference, and this may suggest how these discourses are reproduced by headhunters, who are unwilling to put candidates forward if they do not have

previous board experience. In Matthew's account this is specifically attributed to the headhunters' need for 'repeat business', apportioning blame to headhunters' way of operating, rather than as decided by the appointing boards.

> **Martin [second interview]**: I do think it is still the case that hiring a front-office-type person (.) seems to be a natural kneejerk choice for NEDs: "If you have run a business, you are going to know how to help our Board" and I think that by definition my market is much smaller. I'm looking for a Board that wants diversity of my type.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Martin**: Whereas if you are an ex-CEO [Chief Executive Officer], an underwriter or a CFO [Chief Financial Officer], those constraints don't apply because the perception will always be [that] you know how companies run, you know what the issues are, we haven't got to fit you in some special box; all opportunities are open. So, I don't know, if there's [*sic*.] two hundred vacancies a year of NEDs, that first group, are always going to see all of them. By definition, I am only going to see the ones that have already [turned down] – so the good news is there may not be as many people like me looking, so that might help, but I don't think it is enough. And I think it will always be biased. [If they] have got: a really good CFO, CEO, or a back office guy? They're going to go with them, and I can't fix that.

In Martin's account, having previously held a C-suite role is made significant, through his assertion that if he was to have these experiences, he would find it easier as then 'all opportunities are open'. It is notable that Martin describes this as a kind of 'bias' towards those individuals that have the right experience, and one that he cannot change. This again draws on a discourse where having the right experience is prioritised, obfuscating or downplaying all other factors.

Similarly to Daniel and Matthew, Martin's account is critical of the process; however, his reference to boards' preference for previous board experience as a 'natural' or 'knee-jerk' reaction suggests it is an implicit part of the process, and necessarily cannot be changed, challenged, or negotiated. Even as they criticise the system for being 'biased' or presenting a 'real problem' for new NEDs, there is little discursive space for criticising the premise that if he had the right experience, he would be successful. The emphasis on having the right experience is therefore maintained.

> **Charlotte [second interview]**: what I've been told by a number of the headhunters and the recruiters in this space is "you would do so much", and in fact also some of the chairmen on the FTSE 100 that I've been spending a bit of time with, and "you would do so much better to go back into a corporate world, go and do a CFO of a listed entity and you [will] then be jumping out of a 10th floor into a non-exec rather than jumping out of a sixth floor and trying to find a non-exec". And there's something about that (.), but there's also something for me about: do I really want to go and just do time in a CFO role?

Here again we see the role that headhunters and, in this case, Chairmen [sic.] play in influencing candidates' perceptions of the ideal board member, and how they interpret the process. Having the right experience is given priority, to the extent that Charlotte is told (and here reproduces the idea) that it would be easier for her to get a non-executive board role if she was to go into a CFO role, and that this would lead to her 'jumping out of a 10th floor': being of higher status and having higher status experience, which she could leverage to get a non-exec role. This is discussed so instrumentally and 'matter-of-factly' that there is little discussion in her statement of specific aspects of that experience she 'needs' to be a good director: it is described as 'doing time', rather than learning specific skills or (as is particularly interesting, given the reliance on networking discussed in the subsequent chapter) building her network.

> **Charlotte [third interview]**: So, you know the progress of the non-exec stuff has probably continued as before which is lots of sort of conversations, short-listings. But the clear message coming back from a number of the chairmen, is: "Look if you go and do a CFO role, just do it, and do it as the person who's standing up to do the results announcement and leading it in a FTSE world. It will be a tick box exercise that goes you know what? You absolutely can be the Chair of the audit risk committee and you absolutely can sit on a listed entities board". (.) And you know, I suppose I faltered for long enough and I just went well, "okay, it's a game and in some ways, I sort of need to play that".

In the later interview, Charlotte's account is remarkably similar to that she described in her earlier interview, again stating a belief (reiterated by high-profile people she is in contact with) that if she goes into a CFO role she will then find it much easier to get a board role. This shows why this is presumed to make a difference to her chances: by taking this role she will be gaining visibility in the 'FTSE World' as someone credible with the right experience, but she also describes it as a tick box

exercise. This draws on a similar matter of fact and highly matter of fact attitudes to having the right experience, where experience is viewed as something inflexible and candidates 'just' have to have it to be considered.

4.2. Having the 'wrong' experience

We can also see the strength of the 'right experience' discourse in how candidates described what they see as the wrong experience.

> **Peter [second interview]**: So I embarked on this, actually probably wrongly, believing that I would have (.) sort of, a passport? From having built a business which, when I started as the senior, effectively being CEO or executive Chair, it had a turnover of £150 million. So I thought that was quite a good springboard. So I was sort of quite NAIVELY surprised to find that the listed company board is quite a narrow club = I hadn't anticipated that people would sort of welcome you with open arms but I did think they would be able to make the connection between one business which made £150 million a year and another! HEHE. And the message you continually get is that you don't have the (.) the RIGHT sort of experience or you don't – well you don't really get a clear message, actually.

Peter, who was previously a senior partner at a 'Big Four' professional services firm, here discusses the difficulties he feels he faced during the process, attributing them to his experience being 'wrong': i.e. experience that should be valuable to boards but that boards do not see the value of. He describes how he thought his previous experience would act as a 'passport' and a 'springboard', implying that because he has senior business experience he should have been able to find roles very easily, but that he has faced a barrier because boards cannot 'make the connection' between his experience and what they are looking for. This is similar to Martin's account presented earlier, where his difficulty is attributed to his not previously being a CFO or CEO; the implication is that he would be a good director and is suited for the role, but that boards are looking for narrow or specific kinds of experience and cannot see how his experience 'translates'.

> **Scarlett**: So do you get any feedback about what experience you need to have?
>
> **David [second interview]**: THEY DON'T REALLY SPECIFY but I would read into their remarks, executive board experience. So, I've got executive experience of running this company [Big Four PSF], which is a private company but it's a company that turns over a billion (.) and has 10,000 employees so, this is a big and successful business in its own right. So, I've worked at the top at executive board level within [company] but that doesn't carry

> as much weight as if I'd worked in a similar corporate (.) of exactly the same size doing exactly the same thing with those magic letters plc seem to count for something.

David similarly states that his experience is 'wrong', because boards are unable to see how his experience 'translates'; that he describes this as a 'translation' problem still implies that those who have the right experience *will* find it easy, rather than, for instance, arguing that the selection process is not based on merit. It is notable that David and Stephen describe the preference for certain kinds of experience as boards being unable to translate experience properly, as if this is done out of *ignorance*, rather than a deliberate choice. This has the discursive effect of downplaying the role that directors and Chairs have in selecting candidates, presenting it as a rational process that does not 'translate' his experience properly. It also allows candidates to describe their failure without challenging their conviction in their own ability, as their seniority and suitability for roles is not brought into question.

> **Danielle [second interview]**: So all these things I was invited on really because of my retail experience, because I've got, because people are not mad keen on lawyers. They should be, but they are not.
>
> **Scarlett**: I hear that a lot, actually.
>
> **Danielle**: Yeah.
>
> **Scarlett**: Nobody can ever quite give me a reason why.
>
> **Danielle**: Well, it's because they think we're risk-averse, and then mainly their experience of lawyers are private practice lawyers who always, I mean they are changing, but most people's perceptions are out of date and that is they think they are risk-averse.

For Danielle, because 'being a lawyer' is experience that boards are not interested in, she describes how she feels she has overcome this by gaining experience in the retail sector: distancing herself from the 'wrong' experience and emphasising how her success is due to having the *right* experience. Her assertion that boards' perception is 'out-of-date' is also particularly interesting in this context, as it draws on a progress narrative, implying it is part of a process that is changing (and perhaps that will eventually improve without specific intervention). This simultaneously ascribes 'risk aversion' to a particular kind of lawyer (one that she is not), while also ascribing the belief that lawyers are risk-averse to a particular outmoded way of thinking. This same rhetoric is often used to describe gender

inequality, and can act as a way to silence critique, through the assertion that things will improve (or are already improving).

> **Scarlett**: What (.) is about your experience, or yourself, that you feel that you have to get across when you're going for these positions?
>
> **James [first interview]**: (.) That I am not a lawyer per se, that I have been involved in the leadership management of a large international business that turns over £450 million, four thousand people, that I have had leadership roles and I've been involved in transformational change and have managed a variety different projects. I was involved as well as six partners in the integration board of the firm when [law firm] came together financially in the 2000s and that I'd been involved in these sort of things and not just been watching from the side-lines.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, of course. And is the battle about being a lawyer something you'd faced already, then?
>
> **James**: Nobody's put it to me expressly in an interview context, [for a board role] but I think that I've spent a lot of time thinking about what it is I can bring to bear, and what it is that concerns people about lawyers. You know, sort of, risk-averse, not challenging, (.) that sort of issues [*sic*.].

In a similar way to David and Peter, James uses the business-focused 'language of the boardroom' (Sealy and Doherty, 2012) to emphasise why he thinks his experience should be desirable to boards. His emphasis is on translating his experience and demonstrating that he is not a lawyer '*per se*'; in a similar way to Denise his success is attributed to his ability to distance himself from the legal profession and the stereotypical perceptions of lawyers.

The mention of risk-aversion also discursively combines the right experience discourse with the *right personality* discourse, in a similar way to other candidates (as discussed later in this chapter). Their accounts claim that lawyers are less desirable to boards because they are seen as 'risk-averse' and 'not challenging', contradicting the wider literature that emphasises the value women can bring as directors because of their presumed risk-aversion (Roberts, 2015; Prügl, 2015). This also connects objective and subjective criteria, in a way that upholds a view of the process as objective and rational:

in this account, lawyers can be legitimately rejected because of their personality traits, under the objective criterion of their industry background).

Candidates from HR backgrounds described similar difficulties:

> **Catrin [first interview]:** I got called about a FTSE 250 one, went to see the headhunter, they were very positive and said they'll be in touch. Then they didn't kind of get back to me, then I spoke to them and said, you know, "What's happening?" and they said, "Oh they've changed their spec; they don't want anybody with a HR background anymore", because the general view is an HR background is not popular.

In a similar way to Martin earlier, Catrin suggests that support or 'back-office' roles, such as HR, legal or below-C-suite level operations management, are constructed as less desired, in this case from advice she was given from a headhunter, as an explanation for her being turned down for a role. The notion that on this occasion the board changed their specification explains the board's decision to choose a different candidate, while discursively casting the process as rational and rigorous. That HR is 'not popular' is stated as if common-sense, and there is therefore little discursive space for Catrin to challenge it.

> **Scarlett**: So do you think the HR piece[21] is helpful for boards then?
>
> **Andrew [second interview]**: Yeah, (.) I mean, although I had a HR perspective, it was always a business-led perspective. And that seemed to make a difference. It made things more acceptable; I wasn't banging on about: "What we need is a talent management programme", it was: "This is the business problem; these are some of the solutions, one of which COULD be a talent programme".

Andrew similarly implies there is a preference away from HR, by discursively distancing himself from the presumption that HR directors are focused on talent and placing 'people' solutions in 'business' terms. This discourse is also gendered: first, HR is an area of senior management that tends to include a high percentage of women, and this discursive distancing from the focus on people (i.e. precisely what HR does focus on) suggests that women's experience may be less desired by boards (cf. Holgersson, 2012). Second, Andrew discursively distances himself from the 'people-focused'

[21] 'Piece' is a term used by candidates a lot throughout the research, broadly used to mean 'aspect' or 'contribution'. It is used here to refer to mean his having HR experience.

aspect of his role, an aspect that is typically more closely associated with women in leadership roles. In a similar way to the perceived risk-aversion of lawyers, objective criteria such as career background become aligned with certain personality traits (often presumed, in the literature at least, to be displayed more commonly by women), and candidates actively disassociate from them, emphasising that they are focused on the rational and business aspect of the role.

4.3. Being a wildcard

The effects of the right experience discourse also emerged in how those with the wrong experience felt they were described as 'wildcards'. This categorisation was also present in the research design: in discussion with the partner organisation, Sapphire Partners, they recommended one industry background category be allocated to 'wildcards' i.e. those who did not fit into other categories clearly aligned with board experience. The following accounts emerged in candidates who felt they had the wrong experience, and highlights how this categorisation was experienced by individuals, as a result of feedback from headhunters.

> **Jane [first interview]:** So, I think that of the four people who were on the list (.) my understanding is that there were kind of two, what's the word? Kind of (.) tried and tested, establishment-type people, and then there were two slightly 'wildcards', and I was probably a wildcard. And I think also at the end of the day, and I've (.) I mean (.) this is a generalisation, but there's been lots of anecdotal evidence that the boards, particularly listed companies, are quite risk-averse when it comes to choosing their board members.

Here, Jane uses the phrase 'wildcard' to describe her experience, and places it in opposition to the 'tried and tested establishment types', who by inference have the right experience to be on boards and are more likely to be chosen. This similarly reproduces the discursive construction of an ideal board member, who has very specific experience that Jane does not have. This also casts 'wildcard' candidates – i.e. those who do not have the right experience – as a 'risk' to the board, and therefore constructs and justifies bias towards these individuals.

> **Sarah [first interview]**: So [they] had said in the brief that they were looking for an internet-experienced businessperson, preferably with marketing skills. They were interested in women because (.) well, (.) they did have one woman on the board, and they were willing to take someone who hadn't had prior board experience. So that, that's what we could term the 'wildcard': the role that had more flexibility in it.

Sarah similarly uses the term 'wildcard' to describe a person who does not have the right experience: in this case, her background in internet and marketing, being a woman, and not having previous board experience. Her admission that the board was 'willing' to take a wildcard also highlights the perceived

negative attitudes to those individuals. While the 'wildcard' label is frequently used to describe individuals, Sarah's account suggests that boards and headhunters also use the term 'wildcard' to describe certain *roles*, implying that there are 'normal' roles for candidates with the right experience, and wildcard roles for other candidates. She also describes the wildcard role as having 'flexibility', but it is notable that she uses this term to refer to the board being able to appoint (female) candidates from 'other' backgrounds, who are given and/or adopt the identity of 'wildcard', rather than flexibility in the criteria for boards.

Sarah's account also suggests that 'wildcard' is a gendered term: in her case being a woman contributed to her 'wildcard' status, and the wildcard discourse only emerged in women's accounts. Danielle also notes this, and was critical of the gendered nature of the wildcard label:

> **Danielle [first interview]**: I mean headhunters will say "We put you on as a wildcard" and I'm like, "wildcard?" (.) It's not exactly (.) I've had such a straightforward career. You just think: Isn't that despicable to call (.) because you are a woman basically (.) a wildcard? And you just think well if that's how they present you, For God's sake! "Oh, client, here's our list." and, "Oh, we've got this 'wildcard' for you."

In her first interview, Danielle states specifically that she feels the wildcard label is due to her being a woman; she also notes the potential negative discursive effect of the label, and highlights how this might affect her likelihood of being appointed, as it sets her up as a candidate who boards may be less likely to choose, and places her in direct opposition to candidates that are an easier choice. She adopts the same narrative in her second interview; between the first and second interview she was appointed onto a board, and notes here how, before she had this experience, she 'used to' be described as a wildcard:

> **Danielle [second interview]**: I mean what they [headhunters] used to say (.) which slightly shocked me, is things like, "Oh no, you're the wildcard." (.) Which used to (.) I can't remember who told me that and I just said, THAT IS SHOCKING. I'm the most, you know, tradit- my experience is not at all off the- you know, sort of, wacky at all. I mean, you know, a wildcard to me would be taking an artistic director and putting them forward for a regulated business, you know? Not a boring lawyer who's done loads on risk management. I am not

> considered by any stretch of my imagination a wildcard. And yet, you know, that's how some of them have described me, on the basis that their clients come along with a very prescriptive brief which doesn't envisage a woman to starters usually, or a lawyer, and all this kind of stuff. So what they've said sometimes is that we put your name forward for the longlist, but the client takes it off.

Danielle's narrative in the second interview is remarkably similar to the first, highlighting an occasion where candidates used repeated narratives or resources (Taylor, 2015) to describe their experience of the process. Again she notes how she used to be referred to as a wildcard, because she is a woman and a lawyer, and therefore has the 'wrong experience', and notes the damaging consequences of this kind of discourse. The wildcard label portrays the candidate as a risk, an unlikely sell, or a less desirable candidate before they have even go to interview. Like other areas where the right experience discourse emerges, this is connected in her discourse with the headhunters' need to categorise candidates within their industry background, something that can be seen as a product of the practice of search firms (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009) as well as the construction of boards as noted in the literature.

4.4. The right personality

Alongside the right experience discourse, candidates emphasised the importance of the right interpersonal skills, and natural disposition or personality to be a good director.

> **Scarlett**: So, why does that make you want to pursue other board positions?
>
> **Vera [first interview]**: Partly because I would do my (.) I'm used to making high-level decision-making. Once you've been [states her role title], then you get comfortable making big strategic decisions based on partial information, you get used to using influencing skills […] the business world is very much one of enquiry and influence, and that is really more my kind of natural posture.

To make sense of her suitability for boards, Vera draws on a discourse of the 'right personality' to explain why she is seeking board roles, relating this to her current role and describing it as her 'natural posture' (i.e. something she is 'naturally' suited to). She cites her experience of high-level strategic decisions, similar to the career narratives discussed earlier, and connects this to intangible or unmeasurable personality traits, which she states are central to the 'business world' and her 'natural posture'.

> **Scarlett**: And what do you think makes you suitable for board roles?
>
> **Linda [first interview]**: First of all, I think it's (.) you cannot be a risk manager without being a curious person. Curiosity and challenge, I suppose, go with risk management.

Linda's focus on being curious and able to challenge the board also draws on this discourse of having the 'right personality', again emphasising highly subjective and individual traits or preferences and connecting them to her previous experience. The notion of 'challenging' the board was particularly common in candidates' accounts, and this likely reflects the wider expectations of the role of the non-executive, who is expected to monitor the executives, and challenge them if necessary. This wider discourse is a way for candidates to make sense of how they see themselves in relation to the ideal, and part of the discursive construction of the ideal board member.

> **Gary [third interview]**: The one thing you need is courage; it's about personality. It's the courage to say, "No. I don't understand that", or, "Run that past me again", or, 'No, I actually disagree with that!" And (.) that's a real hallmark.

Gary's statement offers another example of how the ability to challenge is drawn on as part of the discursive construction of the ideal board member. Although the 'need to challenge' was found in both men's and women's accounts, it is interesting from a gendered perspective, given the wider literature on leadership styles and the difficulties that women are presumed to face when needing to challenge without being seen as aggressive. The examples he provides of how directors can challenge (used here, we can assume, to show how *he* can challenge) are direct statements of disagreement, stated assertively and could be seen as combative; it is notable that this is how he performs (literally demonstrating in the research interview) how directors are presumed to perform their roles successfully.

That 'challenge' (something that directors have to *do*) is connected with 'courage' (something that directors have to *be or have*) is also reminiscent of neoliberal (feminist) discourses, where the assertion is made that, provided an individual has enough courage and internalised conviction, they will necessarily be able to challenge the board. There is therefore a discursive muddling and amalgamation of experience and subjectivity, evident throughout candidates' descriptions of the ideal board member; building a picture of what good directors need to do, be, and have, while drawing on a rhetoric of meritocracy, objectivity and neoliberal feminist discourses.

> **Scarlett**: Finally, I want to talk to you about the idea of what makes a good board member. What is it that you think your key strengths [are] and why you've got the positions you've got so far, and what will get you the positions in the future?
>
> **Rachel [first interview]**: I think enormous inquisitiveness; [being] very open-minded and willing to explore and understand where people are coming from, but then also with a lot of business judgment, all probably quite strong. We've just done the board review [and] I was described as a nice attack dog HEHE. So the ability to explore, enquire, understand, probe; linked to that is some courage, being willing to name things that are a concern, and not just go with the flow.

Rachel's description of what traits makes a good board member draw on the same 'ability to challenge' discourse, but using different discursive repertoires to 'perform' or place herself in the role. She highlights curiosity, the intellectual challenge of the role and business judgment, and like Bill earlier, states that good directors have to have courage to challenge the decisions of the board. In her account however she describes this as being 'willing to name things that are a concern', a markedly less combative account of being able to challenge the board than Gary's words. This is validated further by her description in the board evaluation as a 'nice attack dog', which represents a narrative resource that she uses in order to highlight her ability: to demonstrate that she is able to challenge the board while also being 'nice'.

Rachel's account is also an example of how subjective and objective criteria are discursively combined: she asserts aspects of herself that are highly subjective and internalised (inquisitiveness, open-mindedness) as fundamental to the role, presenting them as abilities or skills, and therefore as something that an 'objective' appointment process would need to look for. She also combines 'business judgment' with her ability to understand people's perspectives, a trait often associated with female leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2003) and frequently related to an internalised subjectivity or natural ability, rather than something demonstrated through having the 'right experience'.

> **Linda**: **[first interview]**: [I think it's] the opportunity to look at how other people run things and see where the, you know, the potential pitfalls are; look at the strategy, see if it's well thought through. The opportunity [to] (.) in effect do, in a somewhat lower key fashion, the type of activity which I do and have done full on for the past twenty-odd years in risk: pulling things apart intellectually to look at whether they stand up to examination, and then raising questions and encouraging debate about the areas which are somewhat suspect. I have spent my life, effectively, in this sort of car mechanics' equivalent of stripping the engine down, before putting it back together and finding out whether I've left any screws missing on the way.

Linda similarly draws on the 'right personality' discourse and in describing how her personal traits make her suited to boards, provides her career experience as evidence. In a similar way to Rachel (and again using different discourse from Gary), she describes challenging the board as an intellectual or cerebral activity, through assessing the company, raising questions and encouraging debate, rather than being combative and directly 'challenging' the decisions. This suggests ways in which these women are seen to be doing gender 'well and differently' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012), through negotiating masculine and feminine leadership traits in order to highlight how they are good directors.

> **Scarlett**: So apart from the experience side, what will or does make you a good board director?
>
> **Benjamin [second interview]**: Well obviously being able to fool some of the people all of the time is important, that's been my, that's my career motto anyway. (.) To be honest with you, I mean, I must have intelligence, I'm interested, I'm interested, (.) I care about the companies I'm on the boards of […] I'M QUITE A SOCIABLE PERSON, I get on with people quite well (.), that's is one of my personality traits really. (.) I can turn the charm on when I need to or turn it off. I would say, [a] slightly theatrical approach to life (.) no bad thing really; [a] measure of cynicism (.) is important I think.
>
> **Scarlett**: And do you think those character traits are ones that are found in all good directors? Or do you think that you need different personalities around the table to make it effective?
>
> **Benjamin**: I think anybody who is ANY bloody good will have all those traits. And absent one or more of them, you're a deficient director. (.) Just like with a lawyer, there's no bloody law in the world if you can't persuade somebody to listen to you.

Benjamin similarly recounts what he sees as being the personality and character of a good director and draws on similar personalised criteria: an ability to be sociable, curiosity, passion for the businesses he works with, and a degree of cynicism, which he states are essential traits and have made him successful. This is, again, individualised: he takes aspects of his own subjectivity and relating it to what he thinks boards need, while casting them as necessary traits that have to be brought to the boardroom by each individual member. This discourse also acts as a way for him to claim agency where the discourse is related to success or something positive – as was seen in how particularly men – adopt individualised discourses to account for their success, and attribute failure to outside forces (this is explored in greater detail in chapter 6). In this narrative construction there is also little space

for variation on boards, rather certain candidates (i.e. those who are *like him*) are well suited to the role, while others are not.

When describing how their personality fits the criteria that boards need, interviewees also often accompanied this with an example or 'evidence' that they possess these personality traits, necessarily tied to having the right experience. In Rachel's account, for example, the anecdote of her being described as a 'nice attack dog' in the board evaluation is used to demonstrate that she has the right personal traits to be a director; similarly, Linda refers to herself as a car mechanic with a background in risk; Benjamin, after stating what he feels are the crucial personality traits, reiterates that this is a skill that lawyers (i.e. him) have, using his career background as confirmation that he has the 'right' personality to be a good director.

4.5. Fitting with the board

A third discourse that candidates drew on to describe the ideal board member was 'fit' with the board. Directors needing to fit with the board has been criticised in the wider literature, as it is presumed this will make it more difficult to appoint those who are demographically different to current board members (i.e. women).

> **Scarlett**: What is it that you think you personally would have to bring to the board? What would be your strengths?
>
> **Raymond [first interview]**: I think a number of things. One is, I think, an ability to feel comfortable in a board, in those conversations, I know how it operates. Getting along with other board members: that's effectively my technical specialism.

In stating how he is suited to board roles, Raymond emphasises his 'ability' to get on with other directors, presenting that as crucial to being a good director. As in the accounts above where candidates describe their personalities and how they are suitable for boards, 'getting along' with other directors, 'feeling comfortable' in a board and knowing 'how it [a board] operates' are described as abilities or technical specialisms, drawing on objective or rational language to describe something internalised and, arguably, highly subjective. His euphemistic references to 'those' conversations or knowing how 'it' operates, also hints that boards are spaces that have a specific way of being and modes of interaction, rather than just needing to get along with people in a general sense, highlighting their elite status.

> **Scarlett**: And why do you think that's important, to get along with the other board members?
>
> **Simon [second interview]**: It just makes it more interesting. A more interesting conversation with a person who is more animated, got lots of experience in lots of different (.) it's a much more interesting conversation, than a dull person who might have a huge amount up here [points to his head], but can't quite get it out (.) Boards need, boards work best when they're an organic whole.

Earlier in the interview, Simon had stated that it is important for directors to get along with each other, and when asked why, his explanation presents the board as a whole unit ('an organic whole')

and that this group 'getting along' is important part of the role. This emphasises the informality of board work, and describes an effective board as one that has 'interesting' discussions. He then contrasts this with the notion that directors need to have a specific and narrow type of experience, instead arguing that directors need to come from a broad background in order to stimulate an interesting discussion.

Scarlett: Okay, so, if the ideal board meeting is like a dinner party-

Tom [second interview]: I think it should be MORE like a ^dinner party^.

Scarlett: –how do you pick your dinner party guests?

Tom: HEHE Well you want people who are (.) who are intelligent, talkative (.) inspirational. I want all NEDs who'd stretch me if I was an executive and challenge me, who every time I went to a board meeting would come up with a new idea. Who looked at things differently; I don't want a bunch of failed or ex-CEO's doing, second-guessing me on, from a narrow base.

Scarlett: Yeah, of course.

Tom: I want a light cast from a different point of view that throws a different shadow, ^that's what I like to have happen on boards^.

Scarlett: Okay, that makes sense.

Tom: Yeah.

Scarlett: Sounds like–

Tom: And it should be fun.

Scarlett: – I was going to say, it sounds a lot more fun.

Tom: Intellectual fun, intellectual fun as well, you know? Intellectually stimulating. You should come out feeling slightly exhausted because your brain has had to work.

Scarlett: HEHE Yeah.

Tom: These are my perfect board meeting[s], you know.

Scarlett: Like a good dinner party, in fact?

Tom: Indeed HEHE.

Tom's description of the criteria required for a successful candidate is highly informal and subjective, pointing to interpersonal skills and high-level intellectual ability to explain what the 'ideal' candidate should be. He had previously mentioned his conviction that directors meetings should be treated more like dinner parties, and relates this to the candidates he would want to be on his (hypothetical) board. Thus he directly challenges the idea that having the right experience is a good predictor for being a

good director through his negative comments on ex-CEOs, and instead emphasises the intellectual and interpersonal skills required, effectively using the right personality discourse to challenge the right experience discourse.

This emphasis on fit, getting along with the other directors, and on the board being a 'whole' that directors are a part of, was also seen in candidates' accounts of the interview process.

> **Scarlett**: So can you tell me a bit more about how that process went?
>
> **Karen [second interview]**: So you get a call from the headhunter, then the Chairman or Chairwoman will typically meet you. Then he'll say, he will make a judgment or she will make a judgment about whether or not they are, whether you will fit in. Because there is a dynamic to a board that is important, that isn't important on the executive side. The board is a collective beast – albeit that individuals are expected to express, challenge and all the other things, and they will be from different backgrounds – but if they are dysfunctional together, that is not a board. So the Chairman is quite pivotal here.

In Karen's description the same emphases are evoked: the board is seen as a whole ('a collective beast') and by inference the most important aspect of being a good director is fitting in with this collective. In this account, fit with the board is used as a way to justify or make sense of the primacy given to the Chair in the appointment process: the Chair is seen as being able to assess the fit of the individual with the other members of the board, and by inference is permitted to determine an individuals' ability as a director *solely* on this criteria. She discursively downplays the personality-led attributes discussed earlier (the ability to challenge the board and express an opinion) and places the focus on the board functioning as a whole. This justifies an appointment process, which could be seen as problematic or un-meritocratic, on entirely meritocratic terms, forefronting fit. The dynamic of the board is, discursively at least, made more important than the value of the individual board members, in the case of both success and failure.

In a later interview, Karen similarly describes the interview process when going for a board role, in this case for a role that she was successfully appointed to, when I asked what had occurred in the interview process.

> **Scarlett**: What did you talk about in that initial meeting?
>
> **Karen [third interview]**: It was wide-ranging. What were my views on the challenges of the day? How should they be thinking about them? So they want to have your views on things, they want to know if you understand what's going on in the industry, they want to get a sense of what sort of personality you've got, they want to get a sense of whether you'll rub along well with the others, so there's a combination of different things.

Again in this extract there is primacy given to the board needing to establish how well the individual will 'rub along with' the other members of the board; whether she has the right personality and opinions around the issues the board are facing; and that this is decided by the Chair. The informality of the interview is noted, but not challenged, and presented as important areas of assessment for the appointing board.

> **Linda [second interview]**: So then I met with each of them [other board members]. They obviously tried to do the same as the Chairman did, trying to gauge whether they could work with me, whether they felt I had the right skillset; and everyone's different. Take for instance, [name]. I met him outside the offices. And he and I spent an hour and a half raging about regulators, you know? And about this and that, we had a debate! And he said at the end he said "OH I thoroughly enjoyed that!" HEHE. It was, it's about (.) what do you bring to the table?

Linda similarly discusses aspects of the board appointment process and how the other board members met with her in order to establish her potential to join the board, highlighting the importance of both having the right skillset, and getting along with the other board members. This combines highly subjective assessment criteria with more objective criteria, and prioritises both in the construction of an ideal board member.

Although the majority of interviews focused on the individuals' own experiences of seeking board roles, one interview with a candidate who had been successful provided an example of how

getting along with the board was prioritised by an appointing board, as he was then involved in the appointment of another director. In this case the shortlist was all women, and he is described why he felt they had appointed the successful candidate:

> **Scarlett**: So were they all relatively similar in terms of their background or they completely different?
>
> **Simon [third interview]**: ^Different^ [Name] comes from the marketing, human marketing side (.) Another lady that came from big, big corporate strategic side and then there was kind of entrepreneur-cum-big corporate (.) from actually outside the UK.
>
> **Scarlett**: Okay.
>
> Simon: And really you could have, I could have any three of them, all three of them frankly. In turn they all provided something to the company.
>
> **Scarlett**: So what do you think pipped the one that you chose above the others?
>
> **Simon**: I think there was a certain (.) ease; ease and ability to get on with the executive is very important. (.) Also I thought that she was quite resilient, coming to a (.) you know a [industry] culture with some measure of (.) self-confidence, and not at all arrogant either. The other two candidates were intellectually very impressive but she is as bright as them, but they came across as more intellectually combative and although you need that sometimes, I think that maybe this particular CEO we have who's newish to the job (.) he needs a DIFFERENT KIND OF SUPPORT.

Although not the intended research focus, Simon's account of how the appointment process worked for another candidate draws on a number of the discourses and topics discussed in this chapter. First, he demonstrates the contradictory narratives at play around having the right experience: while candidates presume they need to have highly specific kinds of experience, the shortlist in this case comprises three women with very different backgrounds. While they presumably needed the background to be of a certain level of seniority (although this is not known from this extract), the specific industry background is not crucial to their likelihood of success.

Simon' account also highlights the emphasis on fit with the board, where the successful candidate was chosen because of her 'ability' to get along with the members of the executive team, something that, in this extract, is presented as more important than her specific experience

background. It also highlights how having the right personality might be enacted in the process, where her self-confidence (notable that it comes 'without arrogance') is also treated as an asset; similarly this notes how directors need to be able to challenge the board without being 'too' challenging. This is not to regard Simon's account as being a neutral, accurate description of exactly what 'happened'; rather it suggests how 'fit with the board' and having the 'right personality' are discourses mobilised in the appointment process, while having the 'right' experience discourses are stronger when candidates are in the early stages of the process; as a door opener. This extract suggests then that having the right personality and fitting with the board is highly influential at interview stages.

While the need to fit with the board was a common discourse throughout the interviews, a contributing discourse of 'fitting in' was used by several women when accounting for their appearance and how to 'fit' with other directors in boardrooms.

> **Sarah [second interview]**: I don't really think it's (.) I think as long as you're ticking the hygiene factors and you're the right sort of candidate with the right sort of experience (.) and then when you show up to the interview you look something like this [refers to own appearance].
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Sarah**: You know, I tend not to do anything that is overly going to be (.) a reason or an excuse for someone to go OH, MY GOD she's got pink nails. I do think because particularly FTSE and Aim-listed chair people are pretty conservative. They are thinking of a number of things, they're not just thinking about "Will you fit in with the board, do you know your stuff, will you make a great contribution?" They're also thinking "How is the market going to react?" you know, "what's this person going to look like, be like, behave like when I roll them out in front of the exec?"

Sarah's account here is a response to a wider discussion we were having about the extent to which she feels that candidates can prepare for their interviews with Chairs and/of boards; she suggests that it is not easy, appropriate, or perhaps that it is not necessary to overly prepare for interviews. The way she describes the process draws on the experience discourse described earlier, where passing the 'hygiene factors' means being deemed to have the right experience and references before the interview takes place. She also relates the preparation for interviews to concern with her appearance,

something we had discussed earlier on in the interview briefly, and here describes how she would prepare for the interview in terms of having the right appearance and clothing, in order to 'fit in' with the board. This extract emphasises an overtly-feminine appearance would be inappropriate, emphasised further by her presenting 'pink nails' as a kind of exaggerated form of femininity that is not 'respectable' (Mavin and Grandy, 2016), a signifier, in the eyes of the appointing board, that she is going to look, be and behave inappropriately when placed in front of 'the exec' (the executive directors).

> **Catrin [first interview]:** A female headhunter, she's quite senior, well-known in the head-hunting world on board searches and she sat there and she basically said that if you are going for any interview as a woman, then you must make sure, before you go, that you must have your hair blown dry. And that you must, because you're trying to market yourself to old men, you must try and look like their wives. Imagine! I thought, that's really demeaning, fancy saying that. I don't usually wear a lot of makeup and then I thought perhaps I should be HEHE.

The way that these accounts are justified relates to elements of neoliberal feminism: there is a taken-for-granted acceptance of what the process involves and you just have to 'play the game'. It also draws on a reiteration of gendered difference, by presenting all 'old men' as wanting to hire women who look like their wives, and therefore all women as needing to fit into this mould. The emphasis that Catrin places on the headhunter being senior and well-known is also relevant, because she holds a position of relative power, can offer advice and be a transmitter for these discourses. It is notable that the headhunter in question attributes this to the men on the board: there is no clear explanation as to why these men would be more inclined to hire women who look like their wives, but this has sexual undertones, an inherent focus on women's appearance, and a perpetuation of discourses being presented as factual, despite being sexist. Again it should also be noted that in this account Catrin's discomfort is with the inherent femininity of the expectations that she does not feel able to fit into i.e. wearing more make-up and paying more attention to her appearance than she has previously, again evoking internalised expectations around respectable femininity (Mavin, 2016).

Scarlett: Is there anything in terms of offering advice; about what you've learned so far; what is not useful as well as what is useful?

Isabel [first interview]: (0.2) I would probably say it's perseverance? And (.) if you really want it, you just have to keep going. But you also need to understand the world and the language and the nuances and the culture, and you've got to fit in. So one of my sisters is a coach, a communications coach and I had a session with her in August in terms of just clarifying what I wanted to do, and she is looking at my hair and says, "Oh Gosh. Start looking at all the women you want to be, the NEDs; you might have to cut it or you might have to get it blow dried every time you want to do something", and I was like, "Oh, but this is my identity!". Gosh, this is going on tape, and this is terrible, but it would be interesting to see, because I guess I don't (.) do I come for one? I had a very successful career with [bank] and people knew who I was, and they knew that I'd get the job done. So, I guess, in a different world I always like to go bright colours, so am I not your typical (.) banker person? I mean her advice was, "Okay you might have to be that little bit more muted", that's probably the nicest way to say it, "and more polished in terms of how you present yourself".

The question I had posed to Isabel[22] was whether she had received any advice that had been useful or helpful in seeking director roles. Initially, she suggests persevering was the most helpful advice, a neoliberal feminist perspective that sees working harder as the primary route to success (explored in more detail later when discussing candidates' success and failure narratives). Having utilised this discourse, Isabel then goes on to reiterate the importance of 'fitting in' with the board, and needing to look right when doing so. Like Sarah's description of boards as highly conservative spaces, she attributes this as being due to "the world and the language and the nuances and the culture" [of boards] and needing to fit in with that culture; this is bound up in 'looking good and sounding right' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001: p.2) for the role. Again it is notable that this advice is from an 'expert': a communications coach similar to the one I had in preparation for conducting the PhD, and again we see this 'truth effect': when advice is offered and then used to make sense of the process, it becomes a truth.

[22] This was one of the first interviews I conducted and it is notable how my questions were more stunted and less clear in the early interviews.

The concept of 'fit' has been discussed at length in the literature, particularly in the corporate governance and women on boards fields, where it is presumed to exclude women from taking up board roles. In these accounts, we see how this exclusion may work in practice, where women in the research describe concern with ensuring they fit with the board; however, this is more commonly a concern with 'fitting in', by ensuring that their appearance is congruent with the culture of the board. This, in part, results in a downplaying of femininity, suggesting it is a way for them to do gender 'differently' by emphasising a conservative, muted and less colourful presentation of themselves. It is notable however that this is rarely discussed in explicit gendered terms; instead it is attributed to the conservative nature of boards, and the perceived risk of appointing a director who does not fit (in).

4.6. Conclusion: the discursive effects of the ideal board member

This chapter has outlined how aspirant directors discursively construct the ideal board member. The ideal falls into three discourses: having the right experience; the right personality; and fitting with the board. This construction has two key discursive effects: first it locates directors as members of a corporate elite through emphasising markers of elite identity; and second, through emphasising three key criteria (experience, personality, and fit) presents an overall discourse that asserts that individuals fitting this ideal will be appointed. This acts as a smokescreen for the appointment process.

Throughout the interviews candidates describe or refer to their qualification for board roles by drawing on a 'right experience' discourse, outlining the importance of having the right experience for the role. These assertions tie to the wider literature that draws on a human capital explanation for the lack of women on boards. This discourse was particularly strong in those who come from backgrounds that are more typically seen on boards, such as having been a CFO, having held previous board roles, or worked in banking or risk (Sealy and Doherty, 2012; Lowe *et al.*,, 2015; 2016) and who saw their experience as leading naturally to a board role. Those from other backgrounds also drew on this discourse in their career narratives, placing their experience in similar discursive terms. When asked what makes them suitable, candidates drew on elements of elite identity: they frequently mention markers of their elite status, pointing to their experience as senior executives and directors, awards or markers of significance, or their 'unique' or rare position. All candidates explained how they were ideal for director work by drawing on their experience and locating it within this elite identify framework.

Supplementing the 'right experience' discourse was a strong discourse around what constituted the 'wrong experience'. Candidates from certain career backgrounds (law, large professional services (accountancy) firms and HR most notably) described how they were told by headhunters or other people in their networks that they would find it difficult to become a director, because it was assumed that they had the wrong experience; they have career backgrounds that are presumed to be less desired

by boards. Those candidates who had the 'wrong experience' often described frustration in translating their experience into what boards are looking for, and went through discursive work to describe how their backgrounds were more aligned with the 'right experience' (and away from the 'wrong experience), again through emphasising their seniority and elite status, their work with or on boards, and insisting they are different to the typical candidates from their backgrounds. This represents a kind of discursive othering and dis-identification, which relies upon (and therefore reproduces) the emphasis on having the right experience.

Despite the strength of the right experience discourse, throughout the research (as in the wider literature), there was little consistency or direct, clear relationship between experience and success. Having the 'right experience' is not necessarily a clear route to becoming a director. Rather than treating these discourses as indicating bias towards certain kinds of experience, as has been the case in other, similar research (e.g. Sealy and Doherty, 2012; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005), having the right experience therefore acts as an interpretive repertoire used to make sense of the process, drawn from wider discourses around what boards are looking for. This is further seen in the way that candidates draw on external factors to offer evidence for boards requiring specific kinds of experience. For example, market discourses, research reports, wider social changes or headhunters' feedback are all used as resources to confirm why there is preference for these areas of experience. The strength of these discourses lies in their reproductive effect: reiterating the notion that boards require the right experience (and that candidates with the wrong experience, often women, will find it difficult to get roles) reproduces the idea that these experiences are prerequisites, even when this is not necessarily seen in reality.

Another discourse that emerged in candidates' accounts of the ideal board member was the 'right' personality traits. These were often broad and wide-ranging, but centred around being comfortable making high-level decisions, being curious and enjoying intellectual problems, and being able to challenge the board. In the literature it is suggested that this may be an area where gender bias occurs:

it is presumed that women are less able to challenge and influence the board than men, or that they do it in different ways through flattery, higher interpersonal skills or emotional intelligence (Westphal, 2010). There is evidence to suggest that 'challenge' is a gendered concept: when describing how they 'did' challenge (frequently described as something 'done') men more frequently gave active accounts, while women drew on less active discourses, emphasising intellectual or questioning aspects, rather than direct disagreement with directors. This may indicate areas where women are doing gender 'well and differently' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012), taking on the need to challenge as part of the director role, but doing it in a less combative way than their male counterparts.

That said, the similarities between men's and women's discussion around the right personality were far more common than their differences: the personality traits required related strongly to the kinds of traits discussed in the literature, emphasising directors' independence and ability to challenge the board. There was also little evidence of women adopting more 'feminine' kinds of leadership in order to get roles. problematising the notion that traits typically associated with women directors or women leaders are highly desired by boards, and further implying that individuals need to fit a model of governance that is already established. This was further evidenced by the negative connotations candidates gave to 'risk aversion', a trait commonly attributed to women and often used to justify a business case for women on boards (Roberts, 2015), but here seen as a barrier. Risk aversion is treated as something abject or undesired; often directors from these backgrounds would work to place their experience in more business-led terms, identifying themselves away from the 'typical' lawyer, for instance. Overall, this suggests first that the business case for women on boards has had little effect in persuading boards that they need 'feminine' leaders, and second that board members – both men and women – have to display traits which fit into those already desired by the board.

A third discourse that emerged in candidates' accounts was the perceived need for directors to 'fit with the board'. This discourse emphasises the need for directors to get along with other board members; often candidates referred to boards as collectives or as an 'organic whole', where getting

along with each other is seen as a prerequisite to a successful board. They also frequently emphasised the informality of boards, describing effective boards like 'dinner parties', with interesting or intellectual discussions, rather than as a space where things are 'done'. Other research (Doldor *et al.,* 2012; Pye, 2000; 2002) has suggested that 'fit with the board' is a prerequisite for directors joining boards (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2003; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005); however, this also suggests that even aspirant directors (including those it may disadvantage, such as women or those from atypical backgrounds) still draw on this discourse, justifying and reproducing it, and suggesting they have a personal invested interest in it. This construction often operates as an explanation (implicitly or explicitly) for an informal appointment system, which judges the potential success of directors according to their personality and how it fits with other directors', and aligns subjective assessment criteria with objective assessment processes.

Under a similar rubric to 'fit' with the board, there emerged a highly gendered discourse of 'fitting in', present in women's accounts when discussing their appearance, dress and aesthetic presences. This discourse draws heavily on notions of respectable business femininity (Mavin and Grandy, 2012), where we see women's concern with dressing appropriately and achieving respectable business femininity in order to be evaluated as credible leaders and potential directors. This again is an area we see the reproduction of discourses from external sources: women frequently mentioned advice they had been given by colleagues, friends or headhunters about how to 'look good and sound right' (Warhurst *et al.,* 2001)) for director roles. This was often attributed to boards being 'conservative' and concerned with reputation (Gaughan, 2012), downplaying the potential for criticism. The need for women to 'fit in' was also often described in neoliberal feminist terms, and presented as a way for women to learn how to 'play the game'. Even when women were critical of needing to dress according to the rules of business femininity, it is seen as an unavoidable part of the process, with a kind of resigned irony. This reproduces the notion that, as Sealy (2010) notes in her research into meritocracy narratives in senior women, the notion of the process being fair or meritocratic is conflated with women knowing how to play the game to be successful.

This chapter also suggests how discourses around the ideal board member are upheld and reproduced in candidates' interactions with other people. This is highly common in their interaction with headhunters, supporting wider research which suggests headhunters have an effect on how the 'ideal' candidate is viewed (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009; Wirz, 2014). Candidates frequently offered anecdotes of cases where headhunters stated that their experience or 'credentials' are in high demand, or that they fitted a client brief; they use this as a resource in the research interviews to evidence a focus on the right experience. This therefore has a truth effect: by being offered as 'evidence', headhunters are discursively cast as experts or gatekeepers to roles and afforded power to dictate what the ideal is. The focus on having the right experience is reproduced and reiterated. Throughout the interviews candidates mention areas where headhunters are seen to dictate the discourse: stating that previous board experience is a prerequisite, using the 'wrong experience' as a reason for a candidate being rejected, and describing candidates as 'wildcards'. In research into headhunters' practices around board diversity, Doldor and colleagues point to the inherently gendered quality of these descriptive hierarchies. They found cases of women seeking roles being described as 'lateral suggestions' or 'marginal', when they do not meet the 'standard' profile in terms of their experience (Doldor et al., 2016, p. 296). Indeed, the frequency with which headhunters are mentioned alongside the discourses around having the right or wrong experience may indicate the effect they have in reproducing these discourses. It should also be noted that often the right experience was related to the candidate fitting the 'brief' for a role, suggesting (as research into headhunters more widely does) (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2009; Wirz, 2014) that a narrow client brief is seen as a significant barrier or gateway to board roles.

The discourses that make up the construction of the ideal board member can be seen as operating as impression management (Westphal, 2010) that acts to uphold directors' elite status, power and influence. As Westphal (2010) suggests in his essay on corporate directors' job descriptions as impression management, they present themselves in a way that 'conforms to the normative

expectations and interests of powerful constituents, in order to enhance the legitimacy of the position within those constituents and thus secure access to resources for themselves [or] their group' (Westphal, 2010: p. 320). By doing so, they implicitly justify the need for an elite appointment process or 'closure mechanism' for entry on to boards, by upholding directors as members of the corporate elite. By describing the ideal board member as someone with specific or unique, elite experience; the right personality; the ability to challenge other directors; and the ability to 'fit' and 'fit in' with the board, constructs an individual whose elite position is justified, while locating themselves within it.

The use of these interpretive repertoires overall also has the discursive effect of presenting the appointment process as rational and meritocratic, by foregrounding experience, personality and fit with the board as vital entry requirements. These requirements are also impervious to critique because of the relative flexibility in what makes a good director (see for example Korn/Ferry, 2012; Westphal, 2010; Withers, 2012). The impossibility of having (at all times) the right experience, right personality and fit with the board means that candidates can draw on any aspect of their identity and place it within both an elite identity framework and a meritocratic one. Even when discussing areas of unfairness or potential bias in the process (such as the emphasis on certain kinds of experience, or difficulties faced by those from the wrong background or needing to fit in with the board), this still supports discourses of meritocracy, through its lack of challenge of the process or how it operates. In this way, even while they are challenging the system of director appointments, candidates discursively maintain it.

5. Networking on the route to the boardroom

The previous chapter explored the discourses candidates use to describe the ideal board member: the individual-level career experience and personal traits candidates perceived to be necessary for board roles, and how they rely on and reproduce notions of meritocracy and elite identity. This chapter moves from discourses around candidates' individual characteristics to examine how aspirant directors go about seeking board roles, the discourses they use to account for their networking practices, and how they gain and maintain visibility with 'gatekeepers' during the appointment process. This will explore how two core themes emerge in their narratives around networking: first, the contradictory discourses of needing to be both strategic and subtle, and second how as a result of the imperative to be recommended (and to recommend others), networking occurs within and produces gendered spaces.

The chapter will proceed as follows. First, it will demonstrate the priority given to networking in candidates' accounts and how they strategically gain visibility with gatekeepers, drawing on two contrasting discourses: targeted networking and subtle networking. The gendered nature of these networking practices can be seen where women are less able to perform subtle networking as a route to success. Second, it will outline how candidates bridge the gap between strategic and subtle networking through the use of recommendations, and the importance they place on being recommended and recommending others. This is also gendered: women more commonly emphasise the importance of recommending other women to tackle the male-dominated ('Old Boys') networks, while also being highly critical of women-only networks and networking events. Men rarely discussed equivalent networking spaces, and the majority of their networking was described in terms of its informality, and as one-on-one. This suggests that women's networks may be spatially ghettoised away from individuals with the power to appoint directors.

5.1. Strategic networking

Throughout the interviews, there emerged a strong discourse around the importance of networking in order to get board roles, which featured in all of the interviewees' accounts, and particularly in the first round of interviews. This often occurred early in the first interviews: when asked how they had gone about seeking a director role, almost all of the candidates talked about networking and how they worked to establish visibility with the right people.

> **Scarlett**: So, with the non-executive positions, how have you gone about starting that search?
> **Linda [first interview]**: I have become a complete CV tart, I think is the answer to that! HEHE. No, I know a lot of people in the board practices anyway. Ironically the GroupBank diaspora is amazing. A lot of people who have left GroupBank went into executive search. So I know three or four of the senior people at different board risk practices; I've been to see them. I've also been to see the other search agents and introduced myself to their board practices. I've just basically, you know, cold-called and marketed, said, "I want to come and see you, this is what I want to do", just basically get on their radar. (.) I've then drawn up a list of everybody that I know who is already a non-exec (.) and I've been to see all of them.

As in Linda's account here, candidates frequently answered questions about their search for board roles by describing networking practices, and often the two were conflated, suggesting they were seen as the same thing, and that networking is seen as the primary way to get a board role (see also Brown *et al.*, 2015), because such roles are not publicly advertised. The way Linda describes how she goes about her networking is indicative of many candidates' accounts: networking is described as a strategic and targeted process, which involves initiating contact with as many individuals from their networks as possible, in order to gain visibility (as Linda describes it, to get 'on their radar') with people who may be able to give them access to boards.

Candidates most often targeted 'gatekeepers' as identified in the literature (headhunters and current directors or Chairs), and often they relied on their past career networks, friends or current and ex-colleagues. The breadth of the networks and the ease with which they were able to build and access such networks was therefore in part reliant on the strength and breadth of their networks before they

started the process. In Linda's case, her previous career had afforded her access to many people who were now headhunters specialising in board appointments. Linda's use of the term 'ironically' is interesting in this context, as it acts as a way to discursively 'play down' how her previous role in a bank has given her access to people currently in positions of relative power; there is nothing especially ironic about the way that networks operate, but irony is used as a way to describe it, as if it is a lucky coincidence, rather than due to her position within the corporate elite networks.

> **Nicholas [first interview]**: So I really started, at that beginning phase, with building my networks up. So in my one hundred day plan, I set myself the target of a hundred contacts in a hundred days. These were contacts that divided into four categories really: former colleagues, good friends, headhunters and business contacts or former clients. I had a lot of business cards and names on business cards, but these people that I never really thought about in the past as being potential leverage points for me. So I parked myself in the [members club] and sometimes I would have five meetings a day. And the law of network dynamics actually works; so quite often you meet somebody they don't necessarily provide a 'happy coincidence' for you, but they give you the name and introduce you to somebody else […] it was like a job; I went to work every day.

Nicholas similarly draws on a strategic networking discourse to make sense of his experience seeking board roles, and adopts a highly targeted approach to networking.: on deciding he wanted to seek non-executive director roles he describes setting himself a target of achieving a hundred new contacts in a hundred days[23] The reference to 'leverage points' hints at a kind of commodification of relationships, where contacts are seen as things to collect, rather than as affective or reciprocal relationships between people. Similar strategies were common in candidates' accounts: like Linda's mention of 'drawing up a list' of people, others described how they used spreadsheets to keep track of all the people they had contacted and when they had last made contact, or using LinkedIn or BoardEx to establish who was connected to whom, and to try to access them. This strategic

[23] When I asked why he had chosen a hundred days, he explained that it had been common practice in his work as a consultant to set a hundred day time limit on expected outcomes. This hints again at a tendency amongst candidates to draw on their previous career experience in order to explain their networking strategies, or use repeated resources. It could also be a reference to the oft-cited 'first hundred days in office' (Ornstein & Schenkenberg, 1995, for instance), used to measure the success of a president or political leader during the time that their power and influence is at its greatest.

networking discourse is also seen in how Nicholas sees networking as 'like a job', recognising networking as an active, deliberate process and as necessary *work* that has to be done in order to get a role, although while still ensuring to mention, by name, the private members club that he 'works' in; this states both the normality and 'work' involved, while emphasising his elite identity.

Similar to Linda, Nicholas' networking means making contact with former colleagues and headhunters in order to increase the size of his network. It is notable that he also states some of his contacts are 'good friends', blurring the boundary between social and business networking, in a way that, as noted in other research, is often more common for men than women (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). At the same time, even making contact with friends is discussed strategically and with the clear aim of broadening his networks by asking his contacts to introduce him to other contacts, the 'law of network dynamics'.

> **Sarah [first interview]:** So I've been talking to all of the non-execs that I know. Some of the people here in [company] who know I'm retiring know some of the non-execs on other boards outside or in other firms, and have put me in touch, and we've had conversations which have led to other introductions. It's been a bit like Pacman.

Sarah similarly draws on a strategic networking discourse as something that is done deliberately, with the clear aim of increasing the size of her network and gaining contact with more people, in this case specifically other non-executive directors. The euphemisms and metaphors that candidates use to describe the process are also particularly evocative: Linda as becoming a 'CV tart', Nicholas as operating in the law of 'network dynamics' and Sarah as 'Pacman'. These metaphors suggest a range of different conceptions of networking that underpin their practices, drawing on similar discourses of strategic thinking, and all with the overall aim of collecting or establishing as many relationships or connections as possible.

> **Benjamin [first interview]**: So I just keep adding people to the list of networks. I mean, a friend of this guy I work with said, "every time you meet someone, you've got to come away with two new names of quality". Which is easy, it turns out, as long as you ask – which is one of the challenges. You know, you have coffee, and then you have to go: "And now I

need something from you. Are there two other people, two or three people, you think I should talk to who can help?"

Benjamin similarly describes how he uses his networks strategically to access other key individuals, using each contact as a way to widen his network. It is notable how Benjamin's account sets up this particular networking practice as being both easy and challenging: it is hypothetically easy to ask people to help you to increase the size of your networks, but the challenge is in asking; not necessarily a challenge he faces, but one that might be hypothetically faced. This implies that the only challenge is in asking; he is not expecting them to refuse. This emphasises the skill required, placing the onus on himself to ask, without troubling the notion that he will be successful.

While discourses around the importance of networking were present in all candidates' interviews, they were adopted in different ways as the research went on, and used to make sense of different stages of the appointment process. While in the first interviews candidates frequently emphasised the importance of networking in search for roles, the strategic networking discourse was also used to describe their ongoing networking activities. The presentation of networking as something actively 'done' in order to gain visibility results in a dilemma when their initial round of networking had not led to roles. In later interviews, the strategic networking discourse was adopted alongside a neoliberal discourse around the need to keep networking and work harder.

> **Alexandra [third interview]**: I think, at the end of the day, it's going to be other NEDs [who lead to success]. And I don't think there is any two ways about it, because no matter how 'transparent', supposedly, the selection process is, it all comes back to personal recommendations and it all comes back to who you know. And I don't think there is any getting away from that. So in terms of, "what do I need to do now?", I definitely need to go and look at all of the NEDs I know that I haven't contacted up to now, and try to make contact with them.

Alexandra's account draws on the strategic networking discourse, and reiterates the importance of networking to get roles. Her statement also draws on neoliberal feminism discourses: phrases such as 'there's no getting away from that' for instance, states matter-of-factly that the process is biased and

relies on networks. This acts as a declaration and admission of bias in the system and a direct challenge to notions of meritocracy and transparency, but the solution offered is that she needs to work harder in her networking. Thus, the difficulties in the process are cast as her personal responsibility to navigate, justifying and maintaining the status quo, while presenting herself as an individualised, neoliberal subject who has to work within a biased system. The adoption of neoliberal discourses to make sense of the process is also discussed in the next chapter in relation to candidates' sense-making, but here it is most important to note that networking was not something candidates could opt out of or do less of: even when the frustration they felt at the appointment process was expressed as a kind of resigned cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2009), rather than a determination that the process should change. No candidates rejected the notion of networking as a route to success or refused to participate in it.

5.2. Subtle networking

Alongside their descriptions of strategic networking, there existed a contrasting but co-contributory discourse of *subtle networking*, where candidates emphasised the (need for) subtlety in their networking practices. This occurred alongside the strategic networking discourse, meaning candidates emphasised the importance of networking, while appearing to be subtle, informal, and non-deliberate.

> **Gary [first interview]**: So what I did then was, I quietly just went to see a couple of headhunters that I had known. One or two had been friends, and others that I got an introduction to, and just said: "Look, this is what's been happening, and I just want to make sure that you know". I probably covered a dozen like that, a dozen of the top ones.

In Gary's account, he emphasises networking as the route to success; again, this was near the beginning of the first interview and he describes going to see these headhunters when deciding he was going to retire from his executive role. This foregrounding of networking is described using a subtle networking discourse: he states that he 'quietly' went to see headhunters to let them know he was looking, indicating that while he has to let headhunters know that he is retiring, it has to be done in the right way: through his friends and connections, and without being too deliberate. Again, it is notable that Gary, like Nicholas above, describes his initial networking as occurring with his 'friends', emphasising his strong connection to them, as well as the informality of his networking practices.

It should also be noted that while Gary and Linda both described how they knew headhunters through their previous careers (and that they had similar careers and had worked together), he defines them as friends, while Linda describes them as previous colleagues. This may represent women's tendency to see friendships as relationships that occur outside the workplace, and the comparative ease with which men combine social and business connections and relationships. In the interview context, Gary is more at ease with emphasising the informality of the relationship, while Linda's description focuses on its formality.

Scarlett: I mean, you said networking, so what does that involve for you?

Ian [first interview]: Just going to see people.

Scarlett: And what sort of things have you been asking them?

Ian: Really (.) initially (.) letting them know that I'm looking, and then keeping in touch to see if anything comes along. I don't want to push too hard, just work round the key people.

Ian draws on both strategic and subtle networking discourses to describe his networking practices. After stating that he had primarily been focused on networking to access board roles, he was then notably non-specific about what that involved, appearing to downplay his networking activities, simplifying it to 'just' going to see people. This reticence to outline what occurs within these interactions or their outcomes means adopting a discursive contradiction: he is 'just' going to see people and does not want to push 'too hard', yet he also has a clear strategy: working around the key people, letting them know he is looking, and keeping in touch. It indicates an understanding that there is a correct and incorrect way to perform these behaviours, and that he maintains a subtlety, which is characteristic of British gentlemanly modes of interaction. These contradictory discourses are maintained within the same networking practice, suggesting he aims to give off the impression that he is subtle and not pushing too hard, while internally being highly strategic.

Scarlett: So do you go into those coffees with an objective?

Linda [second interview]: I wouldn't say that. I go in to refresh their memory on who I am, what I've done, remind them why they liked me and when they saw me last, surreptitiously. I've been very casual about it I suppose. But also to bring people up to speed with what I've done since they knew me.

Similarly, Linda here adopts both discourses of strategic and subtle networking, and there is, again, a contradiction between two perspectives: needing to be 'casual', while having a clear objective about who she networks with and what she aims to achieve in the interaction. When read alongside the quote earlier wherein she refers to herself as becoming a 'CV tart', this implies that while she might have an overall networking strategy, it is important for her networking interactions to appear 'casual': both to the people she is networking with and to me as the interviewer. She emphasises the need to be surreptitious while reminding her network 'who she is' and why they 'liked' her. This latter

category also relates to the discourses outlined in the previous chapter, which suggested that board candidates are often judged on subjective characteristics such as fit and how they get along with the board, rather than objective criteria or suitability.

The adoption of these two contradictory discourses was often implicit: the need to be strategic in order to get access to the right people, but needing to ensure they were subtle when doing so, so that those people they network with did not see them as pushy or being 'unsubtle'. . Some candidates were more explicit in stating the importance of being subtle in their networking practices, and of not being too obvious or calculated.

> **Isabel (second interview)**: I have to say (.) and other people have warned me of this, I slightly BAULK at the thought of asking "What are you going to do for me?" That feels very intrusive. (.) Especially if you haven't a long work experience, for someone who you know but not intimately enough to say, "What are you going to do for me?" It's a crowded marketplace and that just doesn't feel comfortable.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah. It's a difficult conversation [to have].
>
> **Isabel**: Exactly. I tend to feel that (.) by virtue of you BEING there, as long as you signal (0.3) that you are interested in the space, I think any more than that is (.) I don't want to judge others, it just, for me, feels a little uncomfortable.

This extract comes from Isabel's second interview, and refers to the *continued practice* of networking; she, like others, notes the difficulty in continuing to network with the same people and to move from simply being visible to asking someone to put her forward.[24] This also highlights an important functional difference between gaining visibility and being put forward for roles; Isabel notes the difficulty she feels in asking her contacts to recommend her, particularly with those she does not know well. Because there is little clarity in their accounts about how they convert visibility into being

[24] It is also notable that the language she uses to describe her visibility is spatially referential: she says, 'by virtue of you being there', referring to visibility for roles as if it was a place that individuals occupy, and again through calling it a crowded marketplace.

put forward, the emphasis is placed on 'signalling' she is interested (again drawing on subtle discourses) and maintaining visibility is the active networking 'practice'.

The way that Isabel draws on the subtle networking discourse and justifies it is also highly internalised and individualised: she attributes it to her *feeling uncomfortable* pushing herself forward for board roles, and explaining that she does not want to be 'intrusive' or pushy. She also reflects on the importance of feeling comfortable enough to ask for favours; much like Benjamin's account above that stated that having the courage to ask is the challenge, this draws on an individualised, neoliberal perspective that places the onus on herself, rather than on her network or on the process. This is supported by her insistence that she does not want to 'judge others', implying that it is her personal decision not to network in that way because she feels uncomfortable asking. By placing the responsibility on herself she also (by proxy) accepts responsibility for her potential failure; however, it also offers an underlying criticism of those who are 'intrusive'. Isabel's statement 'I don't want to judge others, but...' could also be seen as a disclaimer (Gill, 2000); used to prefix something negative before saying something negative. By stating she doesn't want to judge others – and then affirming that she *personally* feels uncomfortable, presents a judgment of those who are pushy while still presenting herself in a positive light.

> **Belinda [second interview]:** But I haven't been shameless about it. I'm not good at cold-calling. I'm not good at selling myself, and so I've been trying to be slightly more subtle.

This internalisation is also seen in the above extract, where Belinda is describing her networking practices and suggesting that she needs to be subtle in how she goes about it. Rather than necessarily relating this to a wider imperative that it will lead to success, this comes with an insistence that she does not want to be 'shameless', further justified through an assertion that it is because she is not good at selling herself, rather than because it will be less successful. The notion of being shameless was notably common in women's narratives and absent from men's, and evokes a kind of 'desperate woman' trope (a stereotype that women are more concerned with than men).

Scarlett: I mean is that something you think you could have fostered if you'd known then what you do now? Could you have fostered [those networks] while you did have a bigger day job or a bigger profile?

Belinda [third interview]: I probably could; I still could. I just haven't. I am (.) more timid than I should be about going out and knocking on doors. It's never been my strength. I could never do cold-calling, I could never do those kinds of things, because I'm very happy to talk to people and explain what I can do for them in a meeting, but I'm not good at initiating that meeting. I need them to initiate that. Which is personality, I'm sure. Or a weakness or whatever.

In her third interview Belinda draws on this same discourse, repeating her narrative, and insistence that it is weakness within herself that makes her poor networking; it has never been her strength. This is interesting when taken in the context of wider literature, as often it is taken for granted that more senior roles in corporates require networks and connections with others. While the aim of this research is not to establish truths and untruths, it does seem unlikely that she would have achieved a senior role in a financial industry without being 'good' at networking. Instead, this discourse acts as a way to attribute the lack of success she has had so far to an internalised weakness or problem with herself, rather than criticising the wider system. This comes alongside an imperative that she 'should' be more forceful and push herself forward, again suggesting that it is seen as the only route to success, and there is little opportunity to challenge or deviate from that route.

James [second interview]: But I think people say "network" and that is actually my one great advantage, I've always been very good at networking and my skills has always been bringing clients rather than actually being a great lawyer HEHE.

In direct contrast with Belinda, James states that his one advantage or strength has always been networking: this is stated in similar terms to the discourses covered in the previous chapter, where we saw (notably, men) describing their ability to fit with the board and their interpersonal and interactional skills as strengths. This extract again demonstrates how candidates see the search as synonymous with networking and state that they are advised to do so by their network.

Scarlett: OK, so in terms of using your networks and networking, have you done any specific NED networking yet?

> **James [second interview]**: With a view to getting a NED role? No (.) but then I've never gone out and looked for a client, I have just sort of milled around and bumped into people, and sometimes they have sort of said "Could you do this for us?" So I'm assuming the same thing will happen for NED roles. And I don't really believe in targeted – I know I am wrong, I am sure, but I don't believe in targeted marketing, I think it's just too cold-blooded and self-conscious and I hate it when people ring me up (.) I get endlessly rung up (.) I find that very tiresome. I think a lot of people do. So I would rather meet people and develop a relationship and sometimes nothing comes of it and sometimes it comes after five years or ten years and on the whole after a while, there is [*sic*.] enough people, if I keep on milling around, something will come.

James' assertion that he is not doing 'specific' NED networking but instead is 'milling around', draws on these dual discourses of being targeted and subtle: he describes his networking practices, while stating that it is not really networking. Given that he stated in his first interview that networking is one of his key strengths, this contradiction is stark, and highlights the strength and importance of the 'subtle' networking discourse: he is skilled at networking, but he is not 'really' networking. The phrase 'milling around' is particularly notable, in the sense that it evokes a kind of casual or non-deliberate approach to his networking, but one that necessarily involves occupying some kind of literal or figurative networking 'space' where he will meet people and be visible. It is also highly individualised: like Isabel, he argues for his networking practices based on what he believes will lead to success, being sure to emphasise that he might be wrong or that other people might network differently, but supported by his assertion that this method has worked for him in his previous career. His statement also suggests a dislike of unsubtle networking ('cold blooded' and 'self-conscious'). This aversion to strategic networking is not necessarily reflected in his networking practices (he still describes the importance of networking, and does so with the overall aim of getting a board role); rather, it represents a discursive rejection of those who are *too* targeted or deliberate in how they network. The overall image of networking is of candidates having to work hard to gain visibility with the right people, while giving the impression they are not working very hard.

He also describes his networking as a long process, which involves a relationship being developed over a period of time, and places this in opposition to targeted 'marketing'-like networking. This may imply (as with Gary and Nicholas) that more useful connections will come from individuals they have had a long relationship or friendship with, rather than new connections; however, it may also be indicative of a wider discourse around being patient and not wanting to be seen as pushing too hard for roles. This discourse is also gendered, and this is discussed in the following chapter with regards to men's sense-making about the process overall.

> **Daniel [second interview]:** It really is all about your networks. […] If you're starting with a blank sheet of paper and no real personal introductions, personal door-opening ability, then I think it's immensely hard task, and if you approach headhunters cold, if you spray your CV around cold, I think you can classically confuse activity with treatment and feel you've been incredibly busy, you've sent hundreds of CVs but actually you've done [nothing]. If anything you may have hindered your chances because once (.) if you're going to enter the arena you want to do it in the right way.

Daniel's statement draws on the contrasting subtle and strategic networking discourses: he emphasises the importance of networking to get roles, but specifies that this has to be done through recommendations and getting other people to provide personal introductions and to 'open doors' to people who may be able to offer him positions. He similarly emphasises the importance of being subtle in going about these networking practices. However, his discourse goes even further to suggest that networking in the wrong way (by being too forward) can be *detrimental* to an individuals' chances of success. The idea that one can network *too* much or too hard suggests there is a fine balance between being strategic and being subtle, and that this is a difficult discourse for candidates to navigate. These discourses are maintained and reproduced through aspirant directors' dislike of those (hypothetical) others who are too forward or direct.

The problems of navigating the balance between strategic and subtle networking are even more acute in the second and third interviews, as the candidates expressed the difficulties they face maintaining visibility and continuing their networking practices, while remaining subtle.

Grace [second interview]: And so I've had a number of conversations with those Chairmen following on afterwards, and I think some of them have said to me, "You've got to do this fulltime if you want to find the right non-exec role. (.) You've got to be absolutely 110% focused on it entirely and keep driving it" (.) and I think they're probably right (.) but there's only so many times you can phone a Chairman up of the FTSE 100.

Scarlett: Yeah, what do you do for those? Thirty, forty hours a week?

Grace: Exactly! (.) You know, that's a lot of hours to fill, kind of, you know, phoning the same one hundred Chairman (.) and it's not even the one hundred Chairman, because by the time you whittle it down to the ones that you know you're going to add value on, and the ones that have got spaces coming up.

Scarlett: Yeah.

Grace: you know, even across the FTSE 100 and 250, there's probably only forty boards that you can potentially target.

In this extract, Grace draws heavily on a strategic networking discourse to make sense of the appointment process, describing networking as a fulltime job: something that has to be continuously done in order to be successful. As we have seen in other candidates' responses, she also refers to advice she was given: that she needs to keep driving forward and be working on her networks. However, this highlights the impossibility and contradiction of networking: while it is something that has to be done all the time, there are only a relatively small number of people who sit in positions of power and who can act as gatekeepers to board roles. This narrow access point contributes to candidates' need to target specific individuals and to be highly strategic in how and with whom they network.

Grace (second interview): And so I understand what they're saying and I understand your networks are important and I do spend a lot of time focusing on those but (.) you need to just be able to kind of follow those through, I think on, uh, just touch in occasionally to follow through. So I'm kind of thinking that even if we touch base with them once a quarter, it sort of feels like you're already pushing it quite hard (.) and you, (.) not appearing, not wanting to appear (.) too desperate.

In this second extract, Grace draws on a discourse of subtle networking; alongside the discourse that emphasises the need to gain (and constantly work at) visibility, there is concern that this has to be done in the right way. Grace's response suggests concern that she is appearing 'too desperate', and

an insistence that she has to remain subtle, and 'just touch in occasionally' with the key individuals. The idea that she might appear 'too desperate' also links to the discourses described earlier, where the implication is that working 'too hard' to contact the people appointing for boards may be detrimental to their chances, giving off the wrong impression and (presumably) leading to failure. This has an individualising effect, attributing failure to the individual networking incorrectly, rather than, for instance, not getting the role because there is a scarcity of such roles, or because someone else is preferred.

The way that candidates make sense of this networking dilemma is also gendered. While men evoked the importance of being subtle and not being too pushy, women more commonly expressed concern about being seen as 'desperate', discursively portraying a stereotypical trope of the 'desperate woman'. This is also seen in how Linda referred to herself as a 'CV tart'. It is also notable that 'truth effects' of these discourses occur here, through how candidates take and reproduce advice. In Grace's case, she uses the advice she was given by Chairmen to support her conviction that she has to network continuously, even while stating that it is not possible or practical for her to do so. Advice from others therefore has a truth effect, where it is used as an interpretive repertoire to make sense of the process; she accepts it as truth ('I do think they are right') and repeats it in the research interview as evidence, even while it is contradicted by her own experience and opinions.

While both men and women advocated the importance of subtle networking, when examining their accounts longitudinally, the way they adopt the discourse was notably gendered. Over the course of the interviews, men drew far more on the subtle networking discourses to describe their networking over time, aligning it with a need for them to be patient and wait for roles to come to them.

> **Nicholas [third interview]**: So now I think I'm just being (.) more opportunistic I would say, not systematic. The process I went through in that starting phase was more systematic, but I don't feel I have to do that so much now. I think it's more opportunistic, and the network taking over.

Nicholas in particular attributes his change to a more 'opportunistic' way of networking, which he compares to his previous strategic networking (the '100 contacts in 100 days' discussed earlier in the chapter). Instead, now he sees the 'network taking over' and, most importantly, presents this as a reason for him not needing to push as hard with the networks. However, for women there is an implication that visibility is something that must be constantly worked on and upheld; men much more commonly described it as if it was something gained at the outset and then maintained through more gentle or subtle networking. Men use patience as an explanation for being subtle, rather than a concern with appearing desperate.

> **Ian [second interview]**: things have been ^coming in from time to time^ [from headhunters] and when they didn't come for a while I (.) after a respectable period of time, I'd ring them and say, "Can I come round for a cup of coffee?" But it wasn't very pushy, you know, I wasn't that concerned to move that fast.

Similarly, the way Ian describes his networking foregrounds the need to be subtle and not 'pushy', but also accounts for it by stating that he is not concerned with moving fast. Adopting patience as an explanatory discourse was particularly common in men's accounts, and is explored in greater detail in the following chapter; however, here it is specifically used in relation to subtle networking, and as a way of explaining his reluctance to push for a role. Again, we see idea of how individuals might network 'incorrectly', in this case not waiting an acceptable time before re-initiating contact.

5.3. Being recommended

Another discourse that emerges from how aspirant directors make sense of their networking, and which relates to both targeted and subtle networking practices, is the importance of being recommended by other people in the director networks. This supports both contrasting networking discourses: in relation to candidates' strategic networking, individuals use their connections to gain visibility with a wider network, which necessarily requires their connections to put them in touch with other people; similarly, being recommended is a way of doing subtle networking, described as more 'acceptable' than contacting individuals themselves.

The necessity of being recommended was particularly notable in candidates' discussion about networking to gain access to headhunters.

> **Raymond [second interview]**: People have been very encouraging, and have often (.) offered to introduce me to headhunters, so most of the connections I've had with headhunters have been through my network, because it's quite important, I've found with headhunters, to be introduced, and not to go in too low.

Raymond here describes the importance of being introduced to headhunters through his network, and this echoes Linda and Gary's statements earlier, both of whom had strong connections to (and/or friendships with) headhunters as a result of their previous careers. Rather than occupying a separate or distinct space to the wider networks, headhunters were often described in similar terms to the wider director networks, treated and referred to as friends and colleagues. This blurring has been discussed in the headhunting literature (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2012, for example), but was less readily seen in the women on boards research, which has tended to treat headhunters as a formalised or rigorous part of the appointment process (see for example Doldor *et al.*, 2012) or as 'accidental activists' who work towards increasing gender diversity on boards (Doldor *et al.*, 2016).

> **Belinda [first interview]**: Well, what I don't know, and this is an uncertainty, is the extent to which there's any value in approaching headhunters directly, because it seems like, as

> Groucho Marx would say, "You're more attractive when they're looking for you [than when] you're looking for them."

The discourses interviewees use to describe their interactions with headhunters suggest that headhunters have and reproduce their own hierarchies within wider networks: certain search firms and individuals are regarded as having access to potential board roles, and these are the primary targets. describes how he relies on his network to introduce him to headhunters; to ensures he does not go in 'too low' (i.e. get introduced to a junior headhunter who is seen as having little power) to put them forward for roles.. Similarly, there was a strong belief that if candidates were not introduced to headhunters through other people, headhunters would not subsequently put them forward for roles. The recommendation therefore has two functions: it puts them in touch with a wider range of individuals, but it also conveys to these gatekeepers that they are a credible candidate; recommendations are a way for headhunters to judge the credibility of potential candidates.

> **Belinda [second interview]**: [Headhunters] hold the keys to the fort, they really do. (.) And (.) you know, I've had reasonably good experience with them over time. But I (.) just (.) I don't know (.) you know, they also don't do it on a reverse enquiry basis. It's very (.) I only know one […] who is happy to take what I would call reverse enquiry. So I will often send her women who are looking that I think she will be interested in […] But if anybody is doing that for me, I'm unaware of it; it hasn't come back as feedback. I know of very few people who have approached headhunters directly (.) being in the position of the person looking for the job, and had any kind of positive response.

Belinda foregrounds the importance of headhunters, placing them discursively in a position of power as the primary gatekeepers for board roles, and this is supported by the wider literature on the appointment process, which suggests that headhunters are involved in the majority of board appointment processes in the FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 (Lowe *et al.*, 2016); however, she notes the difficulty of getting access to them without recommendations. This is notably discursively different from the accounts of interviewees earlier: Linda and Gary, for instance, do not have the same discomfort with contacting headhunters directly, because they consider or describe them as friends and ex-colleagues, rather than as cold calls. In this way, then, the combination of strategic and subtle

discourses emerge in candidates' description of headhunters in the same way they do with others. This challenges the implicit assumption in much of the research that headhunters are neutral gatekeepers: instead, they are part of the same networks and networking practices.

> **Isabel [first interview]**: I tried to do it through references because I don't think that cold calling works at all. So I've a friend who is making an introduction to [leading headhunter] because that is the obvious kind of missing one from my list and precisely because of the (.) slightly position they occupy, I want that to be done by introduction, rather than cold call.

Isabel's description again explicitly outlines the importance of being recommended to headhunters, as a result of their perceived elite position – here she refers to this as the headhunters' 'slightly' – their senior or elite position; she is referring to one of the largest and most prestigious firms, and this is used to explain why she needs to be introduced to them by a third party. This account draws on strategic networking discourse, too: Isabel needs to ensure she meets with all of the headhunters, almost like a collection or portfolio, rather than a relationship. However, this has to be done in the right way, to ensure that they see her as a credible candidate by being introduced by someone – a friend – already in her network who has a pre-existing connection with this headhunter. The introduction therefore has a functional advantage, as well as meaning that the headhunter sees her as a credible candidate.

In many cases, the need to be recommended was explicitly stated, and there were accounts of candidates facing difficulty when seeking contact with headhunters without a previous connection.

> **Scarlett**: So how did that [networking] go?
>
> **Isabel [second interview]**: I got a range that you would expect, at what was perceived to be a young potential non-exec coming from a no-board background.
>
> **Scarlett**: So what sort of things were you getting?
>
> **Isabel**: Some, almost without exception they say: "Oh, it is lucky that the great and the good so-and-so introduced you to us, because otherwise we wouldn't have bothered seeing you", and that is quite disappointing as a candidate, you want to be seen for who you are, you don't want to be seen as a favour to your senior partner. Also it just really shows, if you haven't got that sponsorship at the top level I would have thought it is nigh-on impossible.

Isabel's use of the word 'sponsorship' is particularly significant here, as it reiterates the importance of being recommended by other individuals in her network, and she states that this is the *only* route to success. Her use of this word may also may reflect how discourses present in the wider business media and popular research (such as Ibarra's more recent work on mentors and sponsors published in Harvard Business Review (2010)) is made mainstream and becomes part of individuals' discourses, much like other areas of corporate feminism (see also Brown and Kelan, 2016).

In her account, not having previous board experience (again drawing on the right experience discourse) means that the headhunters would not have seen her without the recommendation from her 'sponsor', demonstrating how being recommended can act as a marker of her credibility or calibre, which outweighs the significance of not having the 'right experience'. That she describes the headhunters' response as 'what you would expect' highlights the strength of the 'right experience' discourse, as it is a taken for granted, common-sense understanding that candidates with no previous board experience will face difficulty, due to headhunters' narrow criteria. Isabel also draws on discourses of meritocracy, and its incompatibility with only being seen as a 'favour' to her senior partner – a senior partner at the law firm she works at. This suggests discomfort with the system operating as it does (based on networks and being recommended), as it contradicts notions of meritocracy (being seen for 'who you are'). This disappointment sits alongside her assertion that success will come from networks and an awareness that she has to 'play the game' in order to be appointed. This suggests that (particularly) women in these roles are invested in the notion of merit and wanting to be seen for 'who they are', which is incompatible with the way directors are appointed.

> **Tom [third interview]**: So if you've brought in by a headhunter who is standing behind you saying "We've sought this person out and this is the reason we sought them out, and therefore you should take a look at them", or if you come in as this person who has already done one of those jobs elsewhere, has already been NED or on several boards elsewhere, in which case its incredibly easy to get shortlisted. But starting from scratch, it's impossible.

Tom draws on a similar discourse, this time also stating how the recommendation from the headhunter can work when being put forward for roles. In a similar way to Isabel, he also draws on the right

experience discourse to highlight a hypothetical candidate who will find it 'incredibly easy': someone who has the right experience or the right level of sponsorship from someone who can put them forward for roles.

5.4. 'New Girls' networks

The importance of recommendations emerged throughout candidates' accounts, particularly when discussing networking practices and accessing the right people. It also emerged in the way that they (particularly the women) discuss their propensity to use their networks reciprocally, to recommend each other for roles and make introductions for other women. This was often framed in highly pragmatic and practical terms, alongside a feminist agenda: to make up for a presumed disadvantage they face as women, they have to network and form connections with other women.

> **Catrin [first interview]**: And so that was a personal contact, then I don't think I was on the headhunter's original list but then I went on their list after they've spoken to somebody else.
> **Scarlett**: Okay, and is that someone who you'd worked with before or was it a friend or–?
> **Catrin**: No, it's someone who I know through the [women on boards] network (.) And we have become friends because we're the two people who are running their non-executive program, so, she and I, you know, we do end up being with one another quite a lot and we are both doing portfolio career, so often if one of us can't do it or doesn't want to do it, we will say, "Have you thought about?" and [each] will recommend the other, as well as other people, of course.

While both men and women noted the importance of being recommended to headhunters, women's discourses often included the imperative to recommend *other women* and be recommended by them in return. Women seeking board roles frequently described relationships they had with other women, as Catrin notes here, who are also seeking board roles, and how they work together in their networking practices. This often means forming formal networks and attending similar events, and recommending each other for roles or introducing each other to headhunters.

> **Rachel [second interview]**: I am involved in a diversity-related initiative: I chair a group called [network name], which is about board diversity. As a result of that, someone came to us and said; 'We want-" they didn't say a female, but of course they meant a female, "with finance experience in investment trust." I gave them five names, including my own, and including someone who I knew was the best fit for what they had described, who was the one they chose.

Rachel account here similarly provides an example of how the formal women's networks function to recommend each other, in this case with the inference that the board or headhunter was looking for a woman with her kind of experience, and for which she put a list of women forward. This operates as a formalised version of the need to recommend other women, and demonstrates how the incitement to recommend women is an implicit discourse surrounding board appointments.

> **Belinda [second interview]**: So I have put her forward for roles when I've been rung up by the headhunter, and the other thing I did ^which actually was quite helpful^, is like, I documented my journey and I keep it updated. So I share this with other people, so when I meet somebody, I give this to them; it's my contacts, it's my learning, it's my tips, it's basically giving forward, being into yoga and all that, this stuff comes back in weird shapes and forms, it completely gets paid back. So, you know, as Margaret [sic.] Albright rightly says, "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help women."
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, absolutely.
>
> **Belinda**: I completely believe in that, so you just help everyone that you can see.

This Madeline Albright quote was repeated by a number of the women in the research to emphasise the importance of recommending each other for roles, and this indicates a way in which these corporate feminist mottos become recycled and reproduced in candidates narratives, and 'made into truth' through repetition. It is also notable that in the case of this quote, the imperative to support or recommend other women becomes unavoidable, particularly through its vilification of women who do not help each other, and reliance on the 'queen bee' trope, which presumes when women are successful they then refuse to help other women.

> **Grace [first interview]**: I don't know if you've ever heard this really good speech by Christine Lagarde, but I will tell you about it because it's such a good anecdote, it should be on the front of your thesis. She's my heroine, my complete heroine. And she did a speech at my old university. [She said]: "When I was at the treasury, one of my jobs was to fill the boards […] so I would send out to all my staff to find some people, and the lists that came back, it was funny, but there were no women on them, almost none. So I made a list of all the women I knew who I thought were qualified for directorships on boards. Every time a man comes up to me and says "I'd so love to hire a woman, but we have no qualified women, we could not find a name", I take out my list, I open it and say: "have one of mine". And I recommend all you put together a list and the next time someone asks you, make sure you

> have an entire list of qualified women you would be welcome to suggest!" Isn't that great? Anyway, so when I'm putting my list of good people, she [fellow NED] is always on it.

Women in the research also commonly referenced this speech by Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, and a prominent public voice on women on boards (she was credited with the 'Lehman Sisters' quote described earlier in the literature review) to emphasise the importance of recommending each other. Like the quotation from Madeline Albright, these stories became part of candidates' narratives, which inform their-sense making, and how they approach networking. This highlights how candidates draw on corporate feminist ideas as part of their sense-making, mobilising it to emphasise the importance of recommending and supporting other women. It also indicates how such gender knowledge is transmitted at women's events through keynote speeches, and reproduced in individual accounts to make sense of their own experiences, particularly in relation to gender.

Grace's account here is also an example of how the power dynamic between myself and the interviewee could be enacted: interviewees' tendency to be 'helpful' (as described in the earlier chapter and reflections on methodology) and make suggestions about my thesis or what the findings of the research would be were used as a discursive device in the interviews. At times, this manifested in candidates' pre-empting or attempting to predict what the content of the thesis and the research was or would be, sometimes meaning they effectively took control of the focus of the interview. In this particular instance, Grace's adoption of the Christine Lagarde quote could also be indicative of her putting her experiences in a context she would expect me to relate to, and in a wider focus of getting women onto boards, while drawing on corporate feminist icons, which are part of the zeitgeist and connected with the women on boards agenda.

While both men and women discussed the importance of being recommended as a way to access key individuals, women far more commonly discussed recommending other aspirant NEDs: recommending others was notably absent from men's accounts. In contrast to other studies that

suggest women may be reluctant to take up the 'women in management' mantle (Mavin, 2006) or may engage in female misogyny and negative intra-gender relations (Mavin and Grandy, 2012), women in this research did not describe reluctance to promote other women or female solidarity. Their accounts did, however, draw on these notions of female solidarity in highly strategic and pragmatic ways.

> **Sarah [second interview]**: I sussed out that, especially with the first headhunter conversation, I realised that they keep calling the same people. And I thought, "Okay, there's very few women that are NEDs, so I am going to network with the women that are NEDs that I know to let them know that I'm looking for-" Now, they can't find me another job (.) but they will remember me and they will send a, they will let the headhunter know if they're looking for somebody.

This way of networking with each other in highly strategic ways can be interpreted as women accounting for how the system operates (such as the importance of networks and recommendations), learning the rules of the game, and playing the system in order to navigate the appointment process. This takes an informal process and makes it strategic, in a similar way to the strategic networking discourse described earlier, and utilises a highly individualised, neoliberal perspective on making her own success.

> **Grace [third interview]**: I had lunch with her last Friday because once you are employed everybody wants to see you again, right? And she then (.) gave me a search she was doing and [asked] did I know anybody and I gave her one name for that. So I presume this quite informal networking is probably as good as anything. Although I don't (.) I can't say I have ever been given a steer by one of those, do you know what I mean? So, I don't know but I've certainly given other people a steer. And you know that Christine Lagarde story about the little list?

In this later interview with Grace, she again makes reference to the Christine Lagarde quote, suggesting it forms part of her discursive 'resources' (Taylor, 2016), again to justify or explain why she recommended a woman to a headhunter who was looking for a candidate. This highlights the endurance of these anecdotes and resources: rather than presuming Grace's repetition of this discourse is representative of an inner 'self', the use of the repeated narrative highlights how these speeches

and ideas are adopted and internalised as part of their own narratives, to make sense of their own motivations and behaviours. Women's insistence that they recommend each other, as well as being used as a discourse to make sense of their networking practices, has a wider discursive effect, in the way that it occludes criticism of the process relying on networks.

> **Tina [second interview]**: It demonstrates how, you know, it is all about networks. But when you are [female] there isn't the Old Boys' network to claw at. And I'm not knocking it because, frankly, I do the same now with women. I will introduce whenever I can, I will help other women. So I'm going to be doing the same as they [the men] do, it's just that our networks are in their infancy compared to theirs.

The need to challenge or move away from the Old Boys' networks was a common explanation offered by women when explaining why they recommended other women for roles; however, this was often presented in a rational and uncritical way, that sees building New Girls' networks as a necessary way of tackling men's homophily and the historical problem of Old Boys' networks. Again we see how candidates refer to the necessity of networks as a taken-for-granted part of the process, and their suggestions for how to tackle the lack of women is to use their own networks to put women forward.

> **Sarah [second interview]**: So you know that is exactly what the chaps do [recommending each other] and so I am just as happy to do it. I'm not criticising them for doing it, it's just that they don't realise they do it, they just think they are being terribly helpful and unselfish. There's no women within that network, therefore they are unconsciously never helping women and they are always helping men. It's just that the numbers game is such that there are, you know, few men who are going to rush out and help the women.

Sarah uses very similar discursive repertoire to explain why she recommends other women for roles, but here expands further to describe men's tendency to recommend each other; the inference is that women need to emulate men in order to be successful, rather than challenging the process and how it operates. It is taken for granted that men recommend each other, and that it is done unconsciously and is a result of a historical imbalance, not a deliberate attempt to exclude women. This is a strange discursive device, in the sense that Sarah presumes or implies that, while her networking is done deliberately, men's homophily or tendency to help other men is neither conscious nor deliberate. She

therefore offers an explanation that is almost entirely devoid of critique or discussion of power imbalances, and instead is just something women will have to work around by helping each other.

5.5. 'Handbag Clubs'

The interviews with women in the research revealed a strong discourse around the importance of recommending each other, putting other women forward for roles and forming all-female networks of aspiring directors, as a way to address the historic imbalance between their networks and men's networks. The way women account for this was often treated as a way of learning the 'rules of the game', and navigating an appointment process reliant on networks and which therefore favours those candidates (i.e. men) who have stronger connections with current directors. The strength of the recommendation discourse was, however, counteracted or challenged by another discourse which emerged in women's accounts, when they described their experiences of all-female director networks and events in highly negative terms.

> **Alexandra [second interview]:** So, there is a new trend, which is in my view highly objectionable because it's a waste of time = and that it is when headhunters say, 'Oh, I'm going to organise the networking event for all these women who want to be NEDs'. Right so they organise a networking event and everyone is a woman who wants to be a NED, and that's it. There is no-one there with a job or no one there with any insight. You're there and you're networking with each other and they feel good about themselves and you're just like [Exhales].

Alexandra's account of women's networking events was highly critical, and this is typical of women's accounts throughout the research: informal networking is constructed as necessary or unavoidable, while formal networking is objectionable or a waste of time. It describes a particular kind of networking that occurs within a quasi-public space: a 'women on boards' networking event, organised by headhunters to engender connections between women and between aspiring directors and potential gatekeepers. It is a notable, stark contrast to the discourses presented in the previous section, where women are highly positive about the potential of women's networks; instead, here these formalised events are 'highly objectionable' because they do not lead to women meeting the right people. This highlights the strength of the strategic networking discourse, as it demonstrates how candidates frequently judge the success of networking or events according to the likelihood of success:

networking is judged purely on whether it is likely to lead to forming more connections, rather than something done socially, casually or over a long period of time (as was evident in men's discourses). Thus women utilise highly strategic perspectives on their networking to criticise these spaces.

> **Sarah [first interview]**: Then I find…I have to be honest with you, there are very few of these women's organisations which are anything more than talking shops. (.) So I've been very limited in how much attendance [*sic*.].

Sarah similarly demonstrates this negative attitude towards women's events, here describing it as a 'talk[ing] shop' i.e. somewhere where unproductive talking occurs but that does not offer practical support, action, or increase her likelihood of being appointed. It being a 'women's organisation' (and her emphasising it being women) describes the networks in similar ways to the wider literature: women's networks are seen as unproductive and not focused on action. While the wider literature suggests that women can find support in such networks, this also suggests that in the case of women at very senior levels, the emotional or affective aspect is also not seen as useful.

> **Tina [second interview]**: Far and away the majority of the people in that room were women and for me, you know, that is not the best environment. The men are not coming to something like this, they don't need to, and the key individuals who are making decisions about the next people on their board or around their tables are not here […] It is not worth just debating and discussing eternally, because the reality is that the decision-makers are men.

Tina similarly draws on the strategic networking discourse to make sense of the all-female networks, similarly noting that they are not a valuable use of her time because they are largely talk-based, and not attended by the key powerbrokers that may be able to put her onto boards. It is also notable that men were described as not 'needing' to attend these networking events, and it is taken for granted that men will already have access to the right networks, and therefore do not need to attend these specific events, emphasising again the problems associated with women-only spaces.

> **Tina [third interview]**: I am meeting some very nice and interesting people and having nice conversations, but so what? (.) It just felt like everyone was trying and it was a great idea and this was a nice networking event and it was free, so you kind of go, "Okay, well it makes a bit more sense". But it was really interesting just standing back and saying, "Okay, so who

is here?" And if you had known who was here beforehand, would you think it was the right thing to go to?

In Tina's third interview she draws on similar discourses (as in her second interview) to criticise the women-only networking spaces as a waste of her time that did not introduce her to high profile individuals, suggesting again that the value of the events is measured in highly strategic and targeted terms. This discourse is also gendered, placing the sociality and 'niceness' ('nice' also notably being repeated throughout the account) in opposition to a more tangible use of actively gaining useful connections.

Scarlett: So do you feel like the more formal networking is not as useful?

Tina [third interview]: Certainly events like that I don't think are particularly useful. I think the events that are quite targeted around something specific, like if you are debating a particular issue, then it is useful to get people together to discuss that, and if you have a balanced, a sort of, gender balance, ethnicity, ethnically balanced group of people, I think you will get something more out of it. But I think if it's The Handbag Society there is no point in it. If I am speaking at an event now I will not speak at a women-only event.

Here again Tina criticises the formal networking events for not being useful in gaining the right connections, and again explicitly states that the problem is the lack of diversity. She emphasises its superficiality, particularly when she goes on to describe a hypothetical 'useful' event with a clear objective. Referring to women's networks pejoratively as 'handbag' societies is an extreme use of the gendered discourse, drawing a connection between the highly-feminised spaces superficiality, placing femininity in opposition to usefulness, and using femininity as a way to denote her disdain.

Linda [second interview]: I hate this rubber chicken circuit[25] stuff, which I think of as going along to a breakfast with twelve other women, all of whom are quite shamelessly trying to get the Chairman's attention by saying anything and everything. And I'm sitting there thinking, "What a bloody waste of time this is".

[25] The phrase 'rubber chicken circuit' refers to "a monotonous round of dinners, often featuring chicken, that a lecturer or political candidate is obliged to attend." The phrase refers to the rubber-texture of the chicken that is often served.

As with the way women adopted the subtle networking discourse, Linda refers to shame and 'shamelessness' to refer to women who network in an incorrect or unsubtle way, who are trying too hard to get the attention of the Chairman [sic] at the event. This can be seen as a form of negative intra-gender relations (Mavin and Grandy, 2014) through being critical of other women, using gendered language to do so, and implicitly drawing on ideas of certain women being inappropriate, unsubtle or shameless. We also see how the strategic networking discourse is also deployed to criticise, based on the assertion that the events are a 'waste of time'.

Linda's negative portrayal of unsubtle networking is problematic when considered alongside the requirement for candidates to network with individuals, particularly Chairs; their networking practices require them to get the attention of Chairs in some way or another. This again suggests that there is a correct way to get this attention, involving subtlety and authenticity, rather than simply attending events for the sake of it.

> **Linda [third interview]**: I found it interesting, only because of the opportunity to (.) that there were so many chairmen in the room. Again, I found it frustrating, this gaggle of people who just want to sit there and either say nothing or say lots. Some are very helpful, it was there I met [female NED] and she was very impressive, and you had the opportunity for a proper conversation. (.) But, no, I have to confess, I have my, (.) this is one of my flat sides, I just cannot be arsed to do all of this self-promotion business in front of sixteen million others. It's just shameless prostitution as far as I'm concerned.

In Linda's third interview she uses similar discourses to criticise women's networking events, again using highly gendered language to describe women who did not network subtly and referring to it this time even more strongly as 'shameless prostitution'. The discursive creation of two opposing kinds of person that are networking incorrectly (people who 'want to sit there and either say nothing or say lots') is particularly interesting, as it highlights clearly the double bind between being strategic and active in networking, and needing to be subtle and not say 'too much'. Linda notes one positive outcome of the event which was meeting a key ('impressive') individual, but this is contrasted to the other women who were not useful connections for her.

The measurement of success according to the seniority, impressiveness or calibre of the individuals attending was also seen in other candidates' accounts, highlighting how directors draw on notions of elite status to describe their networking: when the events are attended by individuals that the candidate perceives as being of a lower calibre to themselves, they often described it as a waste of time; they define it on elite terms.

> **Danielle [third interview]**: I also have to say that I felt that the last time I went to the [networking event], that the quality and the calibre and the seniority of the women that were attending was a lot lower (.) they're sending people on it (.) who are not ready to sit on boards. And so for the women that are there, and have had those experiences, I personally thought "I'm not going to do this again", because (.) I don't feel that (.) the calibre of the people you are putting on it is sufficiently high for me to be regarded in the same group. (.) they haven't had, they haven't had board experience (.)

As well as the gendering of the spaces, and criticism due to their women-only quality, women often criticised these spaces due to the low calibre of candidates attending them, and a perception that they themselves are therefore 'too' senior or well connected for their attendance to be useful. Notably this also relates to the importance of previous board experience, which is seen as a key factor in candidates being of high enough calibre to join boards; as Danielle has previous board experience, she feels she is of a higher calibre than the other women there.

> **Karen [second interview]:** [they're only useful] if you see the senior person (.) you see (.) a lot of the problems with a lot of the 'women's initiatives', as I call them, is that they've been set up by one person (.) who is typically very good. If you end up speaking to that person you probably have a good dialogue. If you don't, you end up with a bunch of people who generally have fewer contacts in the market than you do. (.) I mean, most of the time, I have to be honest and say, most of the time when I've gone along to talk to these women's network things, by the time I get to telling them who I've already talked to, they are sitting there thinking, "my God, where do I go from here?"

Karen adopts a very similar narrative to Danielle, and once again evokes the strategic networking discourse to account for why women on boards networking events are not helpful for her. Karen's

account also connects to the networking discourses described earlier, in that she makes reference to the key gatekeepers (in this case a senior headhunter seen as a valuable connection) but is critical of other networked connections' ability to help her get roles. This suggests that the one-on-one networking (often favoured by men in their networking practices) is seen as the most valuable kind of networking, and that this group networking is 'useless' by comparison.

Men in this research talked very little about attending formal events as part of their networking (see also Brown *et al.*, 2015); rather, networking was nearly always described in terms of one-on-one interactions with individuals who could give them access to boards, or in terms of gaining visibility. The only exception was that two of the men interviewed had completed the Financial Times NED Diploma, a training course (which several of the women had taken too) that purports to prepare candidates for being an effective NED, with some inference that it can lead to being appointed. Those who had completed this gave fairly negative feedback, for similar reasons to the criticisms of women's networks: it did not lead to them being put forward for roles.

> **Scarlett**: Would you recommend it [FT Diploma] to a friend? Would you recommend it to someone in your position who is doing a similar [thing]?
>
> **Anthony [first interview]**: It depends why they want to do it I think. My experience so far is that it makes no difference whatsoever to your employability.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Anthony**: That the FT talk a good game about, you know, that you would be better educated et cetera, et cetera; [but] the headhunters couldn't care less.

Anthony's account here adopts the strategic networking discourse even more strongly than in the women's accounts, measuring the success of the training course through its capability of getting him a board role, as the headhunters do not recognise it as valuable experience. This again reiterates the role that headhunters have in defining the ideal board member (as discussed in the previous chapter) and as gatekeepers to roles; his negative feedback is centred around what the headhunters perceive as being valuable.

The only other director-specific event that men discussed was a sector-specific network, related to getting lawyers onto boards. When those men who had attended discussed it, it was often couched in the 'right experience' discourse described earlier, as it focused on getting visibility (in a broad sense) for lawyers and demonstrating that lawyers can make a valuable contribution; it was less frequently described as a networking opportunity for individual attendees. One of the female lawyers in the research also discussed this network, as she had been invited to join it, and her account highlighted the potential gendered ghettoising that can occur in director networks.

> **Danielle [third interview]**: Just to demonstrate how the Old Boy network is alive and kicking, our HR director here, who I've got a lot of time for, he said to me, "Do you want to go on this programme that [organisation] are running?" Because their model works whereby they get [organisations] to pay them a nominated amount and they can send a number of [people] on this programme to help them get NED positions. (.) And that's great, but, you know, I know if I went out and said: "Can I have some money for this great programme to help women?" I would have been BEGGING. I mean it's good and you do support it, but he sent me details, sort of [saying]: "These guys are mates of mine, they've set this up, would you go on it with a few other people because I need to put some people on it?". So I go to it and it's for, you know, ex-public school; Oxbridge. And I just thought "I can't." And they are trying to establish a service to help these non-execs and I'm thinking, "Fine if you're like them, the Old Boys, you will enjoy it."
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, of course.
>
> **Danielle**: But if you're a woman, would that be of any interest to you? Zippo. So, you know, so that exists, so when I had my male mates say, "Oh, how do you get non-execs?" I would recommend them, but I won't recommend women because I just know they won't like it, you know?

Daniella's was one of few accounts that saw a woman discussing an event in negative terms because it was largely attended by men, and she felt that made it an exclusionary environment for women. Rather than criticising it for it not being helpful to her networking (the most common critique of women's networks), she points out that the network being solely made up of individuals from a traditional Old Boys' network make it most applicable or enjoyable for individuals who are also like them. This presents a contradiction, where the spaces are seen as problematic, and, perhaps, as

enviable, because they are majority male, but also as somewhere that women would not enjoy. Taken with the overall criticisms of the women's networks, this also suggests that the single-gender networks are both ghettoised and exclusionary. The relative lack of networks that are made up of both men and women is a problem for the formation of directors' networks, and the potential for change. All of the women in the study's interviewees had attended at least one, or were a member of a women's network focused on non-executive directors. Despite their view that it was important for women to recommend each other for roles and to form New Girls' networks as a way to get roles and address the (perceived) weakness of their networks, they also largely described these official women's networks in strongly negative terms. To make sense of women's networking events, they draw on both the strategic networking and subtle networking discourses, criticising the events for not providing them with strategic networking opportunities (and thus being a waste of time), and using the subtle networking discourse to describe (most often critically) the networking behaviours within these women-only spaces.

Women on boards networking therefore presents a dilemma or double bind for women seeking non-executive roles: they feel they have to disassociate themselves, both physically and discursively, from other women in the space, while also relying on other women for recommendations, and advocating this process. Over the course of the research, many of the women addressed this double bind by rejecting women-only spaces and networks, and ceasing to attend them as part of their networking practices. This emerged commonly in the second or third interviews, when they discussed how their networking practices had changed since the beginning of their search.

This active avoidance of female spaces and women's networks is reminiscent of other research into women's networks, where many describe their reluctance to join due to the perception that they are highly feminised spaces involved in 'male-bashing and recipe swapping' (Bierema, 2005: p. 216), that will not help them with career progression. In terms of their networking practices many of the candidates had started out at the beginning of the research attending many of these events, but over

the course of their search had decided to stop attending, commonly citing the lack of useful contacts they meet as a reason for them no longer attending.

5.6. Conclusion: Networking on the route to the boardroom

This chapter has explored how aspiring directors put themselves forward for non-executive board roles, and the discourses they use to make sense of their networking practices. As was noted in the women on boards literature, priority is given to networking in their search for a board role: networking is tacitly understood as the primary (or only) way to be appointed onto a board, and it is taken for granted as part of aspiring directors' searches. Candidates' accounts outline how they aim to gain visibility with as many non-executive directors, Chairs and headhunters as they can, and to let them know they are seeking board roles, through their networking practices.

To make sense of their networking, candidates draw on two primary discourses. The first is *strategic networking*, where they describe how they adopt rigorous, deliberate and often highly formal networking strategies, to target as many individuals as they can with the aim of gaining visibility in the NED space. The second discourse is *subtle networking*, which draws on a contrasting discourse of needing to be subtle in their networking practices; they describe how they must not 'push too hard' on boards or headhunters to appoint them, as this is presumed to be detrimental to their success.

The discourses that candidates draw on to describe their networking practices present a highly rational and strategic perspective on relationships, and suggest a kind of commodification of relationships, where the aim of networking is to collect or form as many relationships as possible. By listing their connections with headhunters, maintaining spreadsheets of who they have contacted most recently and how to access other people, treating their networking as 'going to see people' (simultaneously seeing anyone they can, while also being targeted and choosy), the practice of networking reduces relationships to their strategic function: gaining visibility. This discourse therefore challenges the notion that women in particular have strong, affective relationships at work and are less likely to have strategic ones (cf. Mavin and Grandy, 2012); rather, both men and women seeking board roles describe these connections in highly strategic terms. Relationships that cannot provide connections to relevant others, or lead to the potential of being appointed, are described in

highly negative terms; this also emerges in how women describe women's official networks, and the notion that connections or events (which do not lead to success) can be a 'waste of time'.

The evocation of subtle networking in candidates' accounts can be seen as a form of elite identity formation maintenance, and part of the elite classes' culture of being (Savage *et al.*, 2015). Alvesson and Robertson argue that 'elite' identity is different from many other kinds of identity, as to directly identify with it would 'imply pretentiousness' (Alvesson and Robertson 2006: p. 200). Instead the 'cultural or symbolic meanings are implicit and indirectly hinted at' (*ibid*.). This rhetoric underpins candidates' accounts as to how and why they need to network subtly: it is important that they are not too direct or pushy, as members of the elite do not make their elite status known. In this sense, their reluctance to identify themselves as searching for roles (as discussed in the methodology chapter), or as pushing 'too hard' for success is both reflective of social norms surrounding their networking, and the population they identify with. Not wanting to appear pushy is therefore a function of elite identity that maintains elite closure; however, it is also gendered in how they account for it: while men avoid being pushy, women avoid being 'desperate'.

The discourses that candidates use to make sense of their networks and networking practices are also gendered. While both men and women describe similar networking practices, and emphasise the need to be both strategic and subtle in their networking, they use these repertoires in different ways to makes sense of their experience. Firstly, women far more commonly utilised the *strategic networking* discourse, while men's adoption of the strategic networking discourse was less explicit. While all candidates also adopted the subtle networking discourse and were reluctant to push 'too hard' for roles, men more frequently described this as *not needing to* push for roles, or related this their natural disposition to not push too hard, while women described greater concern with not wanting to appear 'desperate' or pushy. Women also more commonly described the difficulty they find being both strategic and subtle; this may suggest their ability to be both jeopardised in a way that men's is not.

Secondly, another discourse in interviewees' accounts relates to the importance of being recommended to key individuals as part of their networking. Candidates frequently described the importance of being recommended, most notably to headhunters, who are seen as being difficult to approach 'cold' or without an introduction, with the perception that they will only be interesting to headhunters if they are introduced by someone else. This reliance on recommendations acts as a barrier to new candidates who are not already connected to directors, making it difficult for them to (successfully) contact headhunters out of the blue. Maintaining a barrier to entry is, as noted in the wider literature on executive search firms, part of the professionalization of their industry: maintaining a high barrier to entry is in their best interests if they are to maintain the notion that they have an exclusive and select range of potential candidates (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2012; Wirz, 2012). Aspiring directors also describe this as a taken-for-granted part of the appointment process, and therefore the incitement to recommend each other and seek out recommendations or introductions to headhunters is part of their strategic networking.

The importance of being recommended also contributes to our understanding on how women and men in senior roles rely on sponsors (Ibarra, 2010) in order to be successful. Those candidates with sponsors people prepared to introduce them to key individuals, advocate their ability, and recommend them for roles described the process in more positive terms. Relying on recommendations can place women at a disadvantage, because they are less likely to have key advocates or sponsors in senior roles (*ibid.*); however, these findings also demonstrate that, in the case of directors, sponsors can be individuals who are not necessarily more 'senior'. Candidates were often 'sponsored' by people who were not necessarily more senior than them, but better connected to gatekeepers. This also demonstrates the complexity of these networks, and the difficulties individuals face if they are not already connected to them. Being recommended for a role also acts as a bridge between needing to be both strategic and subtle in networking practices: being recommended by someone else allows them to be targeted and strategic while remaining subtle. When recommending others, candidates did

not express the same concerns with being too pushy, suggesting an interesting inconsistency whereby candidates can push others forward, but cannot push *themselves* forward.

The reliance on recommendations and sponsors is also gendered in how it is embedded in candidates' discourses. While most candidates (men and women) discussed the dilemma of needing to be introduced and recommended for roles (particularly when negotiating connections with headhunters), women far more commonly advocated the importance of *recommending other women* as a way to tackle the historical Old Boys' networks. While men may have recommended each other for roles, it was notably absent in their accounts. This represents a facet of corporate or neoliberal feminism, which sees women working (together) to overcome barriers, but not challenging the status quo (cf. Rottenberg, 2014). While this may represent a 'reality' in their networking (perhaps women do more commonly recommend others than men), it may also reflect women's desire to emphasise these networking practices in the interview, forming part of the self-identity that they wish to portray, and drawing on corporate feminist icons to do so. Given these references, and most notably the assertion that there is a 'special place in hell for women who do not help other women', this may suggest that the imperative to help other women is part of senior women's self-identity, to avoid any claim that they are 'Queen Bees' or 'pulling the ladder up' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012), and a strategic necessity to tackle men's networks. It has the overall effect of reproducing the status quo, and placing responsibility for overcoming barriers onto the individual.

The importance of networking and recommending other candidates also manifests in the presence of women's formal networks. Despite women holding strong views that it was important for women to recommend each other for roles and to form New Girls' networks, official women's networks were described in strongly negative terms, as frequently observed in wider research (Biemera, 2005; Kelan, 2010). Overall, there is a problematic contradiction in women's networking accounts. They describe an imperative to network with other women, and a need to subvert men's networks; the importance of being recommended; and a pseudo-feminist imperative to help other

women, while simultaneously voicing dissatisfaction with women-only networks. Unlike wider research into women's networks, these networks are described as being used for emotional or affective support; rather they are criticised because the key powerbrokers in board appointments are most commonly men, and therefore formal networking with other women will not help them to get roles.

The way that women describe women's networks can also be seen as part of their gendered, elite sense-making, where in the process of discursively criticising the women's networks they also emphasises their own elite status, and use gendered language to speak pejoratively about other women. This discursive combination highlights the importance of understanding women seeking board roles as occupying a unique space, as gendered members of an elite (or members of a gendered elite). This is done through drawing again on the subtle and strategic networking discourses: they speak positively about networking events that result in their being able to gain connections with the right people (strategic networking success) and negatively about women who do not network in the right way (those who do not adopt subtle networking), who are described, amongst other things, as 'shameless'. They also use gendered language to critique the events themselves, which are seen as being primarily focused on talk, rather than action.

Building on these discourses and how they emerge in candidates' networking practices, the next chapter explores how these discourses of subtle and strategic networking and neoliberal feminism also emerge in how candidates make sense of the process overall, and their own successes and failures.

6. Leaning in or sitting back? Gendered sensemaking on the route to the boardroom

So far this thesis has explored how aspiring directors experience the board appointment process, on micro and meso levels. On a micro or individual level, Chapter 4 explored candidates' perception of the individual characteristics and experience required for board roles, how this discursively creates an 'ideal' board member, and how notions of the ideal board member act as a smokescreen and make the board appointment process impervious to critique. On a meso or relational level, chapter 5 examined see how candidates seek board roles and their reliance on networking and visibility; and how men's and women's networking practices are gendered, with women often ghettoised into women's networks that do not as commonly allow them access to key powerbrokers. We also saw how gendered expectations result in women having highly targeted and active networking strategies, while men's were more passive. Building on these findings this chapter will outline how candidates make sense of the process overall and wider discourses they draw upon to account for their successes and failures. This reveals how their discourses are gendered, and the wider, macro discursive effects of these discourses.

In making sense of their success and failure, women draw on neoliberal discourse to make sense of the board appointment process, emphasising the work they have to put into networking, interacting with headhunters and learning how to 'play the game'. Like Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and other corporate feminism texts as mentioned in earlier chapters, this discourse clearly underlines the women's retrospective justification for their success as a result of them overcoming internal barriers (such as lack of confidence) and external barriers (such as lack of networked support) and being active in their networking practices. They also draw on these discourses to account for their failure, or difficulties faced in getting roles, where it was their inability to overcome these same barriers that prevented them from succeeding. This internalisation means that the only solution is to work harder, as there is no external issue to account for their failure. In contrast, men frequently draw on a 'sit back' discourse, where they present their success as something that came or will come with

little effort, and often as a result of their ability to be patient, choosy, and wait for the 'right' role to come to them. Similarly they present failure as resulting either from their decision to be choosy or as a result of the focus on getting women onto boards. Often men perceived there to be an advantage for women, which meant they had to be patient while boards address their diversity. This affords them a way of explaining both their successes and failures in such a way that they uphold their self-presentation as someone who is or will be successful, and the only thing that needs to change is the presumed influx of women.

6.1. The Neoliberal Hero(ine): Leaning In

Women who were successful in gaining board roles over the course of the research, often attributed their success, either explicitly or implicitly, to their hard work:

> **Linda [third interview]**: I just think, looking back, now my husband has just been amazed. I left [previous company]; I didn't have anything lined up. And he's blown away by the fact that I, basically I've sorted myself out. He turned to me the other day and said "You've really taken this on as a campaign, haven't you?" and I said, it wasn't (.) It didn't feel like it, but I suppose when you look back on it (.) it's (.) you just know what you've gotta do. You've gotta get out there, and you've gotta do stuff that goes against the grain, but, you know, at the end, it's okay, it will pay off.

In looking back at her search for board roles and her subsequent success, Linda uses a narrative that emphasises her hard work and 'campaign' of networking, which she implies has led to her gaining a board role. Her narrative is starkly neoliberal and individualised, and presents herself as a kind of neoliberal hero(ine): starting with nothing when she retired ("I didn't have anything lined up"), taking on a campaign of networking and pushing herself forward, resulting in success. It is notable that even within this narrative she emphasises her discomfort with needing to network (doing "stuff that goes against the grain") but with the overall insistence that it 'will pay off'. This ties to the discourses presented in the previous chapter, around networking being seen as a 'necessary evil' that candidates had to go through in order to be successful, but emphasises how hard she worked to get the role. She is able to account for the networking retrospectively as something that was 'worth doing'; a rationalisation or acceptance of the system as it is, because she is able to navigate it. She also uses her husband as a reference point, by stating his apparent amazement at her success (despite her being one of the most senior women in a FTSE 100 company) as a way of discussing it.

> **Alexandra [second interview]**: I'm sure the reason why I got (.) put on the list was because I = I went to a cocktail party hosted by that headhunter (.) And it was a day where I was in Manchester for a board meeting (.) that started at nine in Manchester, so you have to get up at the crack of SPARROWS in the morning to take the train to Manchester. Audit Committee

Meeting; board meetings; some politics at the end; some issue with the trains, eventually you get (.) back to London, You really feel like a cocktail party, don't you?

Scarlett: Yeah HEHE

Alexandra: You know, make-up since five in the morning (.) but I just hold my backside in the air and did it = and it just goes to show like you've got to do these things.

Scarlett: Yeah.

Alexandra: But if I was listening to my body (.) I wouldn't have gone there, you know what I mean?

Like Linda, Alexandra attributes her success to hard work and perseverance, and adopts a similar 'hero(ine)' narrative: where she battled against her discomfort (in this case, the needs of her own body) to go to a networking event, attributing her success to her active networking practices and ability to overcome her physical needs in order to do so. Her reference to having worn make-up since five in the morning adds an additional gendered element to the sense-making: wearing make-up is a taken-for-granted and necessary part of her work (aesthetic labour) and wearing it all day contributes to the overall description of her physical discomfort, and the labour required to attend the networking event.

Like Linda, Alexandra's narrative fluctuates between different temporal perspectives, by looking back at her networking practices and then being able to attribute her success to them. This converts individual success into a wider imperative, where it is used to insist that it is what "*you* have to do…*you've* got to get out there", "*You've got* to do these things"; drawing strongly on, and reproducing, neoliberal discourses. This discursive shift, from an individual's hard work leading to success being extrapolated out to a wider perception on what leads to success, reiterates the importance of attending networking events as a strategy to get roles, despite this being in contradiction to women's description of the networking events, which presented them as being a 'waste of time'. This may suggest, then, that headhunters and networking events are regarded (especially by women) as resources they can and must access as part of their (net)work, rather than as something that will actively help them to get roles. This again draws on a neoliberal, individualised

discourse to describe elements of the process and her success, which she is able to adopt because of the benefit of hindsight.

Similarly, Laura was appointed to a board during the research period, and is describing the process overall and what she sees as leading to success.

> **Laura [third interview]**: It's a bit like, when you look back, I look back at the last twelve months. It's a bit like ANYTHING else. (.) Getting a job, be it your first job, your second your third job, whatever. It's a little bit about self-promotion, it's a little bit about how you come across in interview, it's a BIT about having the right skills, and then there's a bit of luck. And if you acknowledge that, and say "Okay, what does it take for me to do, to get to 'X' and work it out?" (.) A bit like, "Well, what's it going to take for me to get a good job interview?" (.) It's no different! It's just not the SAME (.) But if you think somebody's going to do you a favour? Forget it. It's far more a case of word-of-mouth that your CV alone will vouch for.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yep, yep.
>
> **Laura**: But, you know, once you've worked it out and prepared to put a little leg work in, and be a little shameless in pulling your skirt up on the street corner. It's actually-
>
> **Scarlett**: yep.
>
> **Laura**: and it's the same for men!

Laura also adopts a neoliberal discourse to explain the process and how she was able to navigate it successfully. She describes many aspects of the process that contribute to her success: self-promotion, interviewing well, a 'BIT about having the right skills, and a bit of luck. That she emphasises a 'bit' appears to reduce her skills in comparison to other aspects that she mentions, and this is echoed later when she asserts that it is 'more word of mouth that the CV will vouch for', reiterating that having the right experience is less important than other aspects. The notion of learning how to play the rules of the game has the discursive effect of placing the impetus for success onto the individual, who is responsible for putting the effort in.

That she relates non-exec search to other kinds of job is also notable; later in the interview she discusses this is relation to her son, who is a similar age to me and is looking for a job after

university, and we talked about the similarities in the process between herself and him. This may be interpreted as a way to relate her experience to my own and find common ground in the interview; however, it also has the discursive effect of placing a normative framework over the appointment process, and drawing on a wider neoliberal discourse: one where no-one can expect anyone to 'do it for you', at any level of employment. This does not allow discursive space for challenging the process, as again it iterates that it is the same at all levels, even for young men at lower levels of employment. This also points to the tension between 'expecting someone to do you a favour' and it being word-of-mouth: the word-of-mouth aspect of the appointment process means, by its very nature, getting someone to 'help'. She reiterates this contradiction further by emphasising how, once you know it's all about word-of-mouth and recommendations, you then have to put the work in. In her account, (female) candidates need to learn how to play the game, and once they have worked out the rules, the rest is 'just' hard work.

The description of playing the game as 'being shameless in pulling your skirt up on a street corner' uses highly gendered language that likens the work needed for the process to sex work, with a fairly derogatory tone, suggesting a kind of abject femininity. It should also be pointed out that Linda was, in an earlier chapter, talking negatively about women who were 'shameless' in their networking: those whom she did not see as being senior enough to get roles on boards but who were pushing themselves forward. It is interesting then that she uses the word 'shameless' here to describe her own networking practices. This might be an attempt to claim she was being shameless in the 'right' way: because she networked (shamelessly) with people who were able to appoint her, she is different to those women who are doing it shamelessly and failing. On the other hand, it may be a way to describe her realisation that because the system operates in a certain way, the *only* way to navigate it is to behave in a way that she sees as unacceptable or shameless, again presenting networking as a necessary evil. She then states that it is the same for men, a curious statement to follow such a gendered phrased, but this has the effect of pre-empting criticism that I might raise and normalising the process: men have to do the same, so it is a 'fair' system (also interesting given that

the men's accounts suggest they do not see the networking in the same way; it is literally *not* the same for men). This results in insistence that the process is gender-neutral, even when using highly gendered discourses to describe it.

6.2. Working (within) the system

Women also used the 'working hard' discourse to account for how the process operates, and learning how to play the game in relation to how headhunters operate. Charlotte, below, talked in both her first and second interviews about needing to make sure that the headhunter knows what kind of roles that she wants, and ensuring that, should she be put forward, they were in no doubt she would say yes.

> **Charlotte [first interview]:** the headhunter is a sales person, right. Frankly, they're not your friend, they're not your career advisor, they don't care they just want the sale. So (.) saying, "Back me because I'll say, yes; if you give me the job, I'll say yes and you can get your fee". "Yes, I'll say yes to this one". Reassure the headhunter, don't say = "Well, I'm not sure because he had stripes and I prefer, whatever". You can't say that to the headhunter because the headhunter is like, "Crumbs, she may not say yes, I need to get another one. I'd better talk the other one up to the client", but if you say, "I'll say yes, I'll say yes, I'll say yes", she will talk you up to the client.

The interactional work that Charlotte describes needing to put in with the headhunter is remarkable, and treats headhunters' decision-making as something she needs to work on, to make sure that they put her forward for a role. This portrays the headhunter as powerful in the space, but also places the responsibility of pushing forward and getting appointed back onto herself. This narrative again allows her to claim full credit for her success: in this account, even the headhunter thinking she was the right candidate and putting her forward for a role is attributed to her own persistence and the 'work' she puts in to persuade them. One the other hand, it also means taking responsibility for her failure: rather than the headhunter being blamed for not putting her forward, she sees it as her responsibility to make sure the headhunter knows she wants the role.

She picks up this same discourse in her second interview:

> **Charlotte [second interview]**: Well, at the moment the headhunter; it's still the racehorse of the headhunters, so it's very important that the headhunter knows that you're going to say yes because they're thinking, "Am I going to get my commission?"
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, of course.
>
> **Charlotte**: And of course, they're only going to get their commission if you're going to say, "Yes". If you say, "well I'm not quite sure", they're like, "Oh shit", you know: "Let's make

sure that the other one is the racehorse that I'll back".

Charlotte adopts the same discourse to explain the process with remarkable consistency, given the interviews were six months apart. There is almost an ironic 'knowingness' and pragmatism to her narrative, an acknowledgment of bias or problems in the system. Rather than criticising the process writ large, she uses it as a discursive tool to portray herself as someone who is able to work around it.

> **Charlotte [third interview]**: So, it's important that you play the headhunter at their game. Well, not like 'play', more just if you're interested in the job, just tell them. If you're not interested in the job then tell them as well but don't say, "I don't want this job", use it as an opportunity to say "BUT if the following job appears, I'll say, yes to that." Because that's useful, then they'll box that in and then they'll say, "Okay fine", because they're only interested in the "Yes".
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, yeah, no, I see what you mean, that they do end up (.) you get to know what they [want], what it is that they're looking for.
>
> **Charlotte**: So, if you have some doubts = female doubts, just try not to voice them to the headhunter.

In the third interview, Charlotte describing her doubts as 'female' is an even more explicit example of how feminine qualities are described with disdain and used pejoratively *by women* throughout the research, as was highlighted earlier in the way that women's networks were referred to as 'handbag clubs', and how they distance themselves from femininity. It also suggests that she aligns conviction as something more common in men, and that women therefore need to do more often: disavowing their 'female' doubts and pushing forward. This again adopts the 'lean in' rhetoric *par excellence*; women are encouraged (and encourage themselves to) tackle the internalised barriers (i.e themselves) that might hold them back; be courageous, strong, and push themselves forward (more so than they are already doing). The way that Charlotte uses the phrase 'female doubts' casts it as if it is common sense: an interpretive repertoire that draws on neoliberal feminist discourses, wherein women's difference and self-limiting behaviour are taken for granted.

Eleanor [first interview]: And then when you follow up [after the interview with the headhunter], you actually pull the job description out and you = they say all the different requirements; you take one or two requirements, you put them in the email and you give evidence as to why you have got those positions. So, it is like an application form for a university degree, right? You've got to look it that way, you can't just say, "Here's my CV." You've got to preface it and you have to put in the work.

Like Laura earlier in this chapter, Eleanor compares the board appointment process with other kinds of recruitment, in this case relating it to a degree application. This may be indicative of her seeking to relate it to something I may be able to understand and relate to; but locating it in these terms, she draws attention to the similarities between this and other levels of recruitment, and again discursively takes the responsibility out of the hands of the headhunter and away from what is specific to elite recruitment. By describing it in these terms, her insistence that you need to 'put in the work' is justified, and this has a knock on effect of justifying the process. Given that, in this case, the 'work' she is talking about (identifying what about her background would fit the role) could conceivably be seen as the headhunters' responsibility, she discursively reduces their role and their effectiveness to something she has to address. This acts to simultaneously downplay or denigrate the role of the headhunter while applying self-attribution to the success.

Karen [first interview]: So, we [Karen and the headhunter] were going to meet up, but because it was over Easter we couldn't, I said, "well look if you like, I [could] just send you a little note saying why I think my experience fits the brief.

Scarlett: Yeah.

Karen: And that's what I tend to do if I see anything, you know, to make it easy for the headhunter. Because you can have your CV, but nobody knows it as well as you do, so therefore, I send it and then say, "you know I fit the brief because of blah, blah, blah" and some of those things will be on the CV but you can give greater detail, so what I did, so he then said, "Oh that's really helpful, I don't need to meet you then" literally I was able to list in each of my roles where I had experience in the area that they said on the specification.

Karen's explanation draws on a 'lean in' discourse, and one that is based on the headhunter being inefficient, and a need to make it easy for him. Her anecdote about how the headhunter thanked her for providing the break down of why she was helpful relates again to her pushing forward, and

indicates that it was her going the extra mile that led to the success. The headhunter and the CV thus become aspects of the story that are discursively drawn upon as a way for the candidates to make sense of their own success within a highly individualised, neoliberal framework, and which affords her the credit for her success, too.

6.3. Failure and self-blame

The 'lean in' discourse also emerged in women's accounts of difficulties they face during their search for roles where they were relatively unsuccessful; dealing with failure most commonly meant pushing forward and working harder to get a role.

> **Scarlett**: So how does that frustration make you feel about the search going forward, I mean, have you changed your mind?
>
> **Martha [second interview]**: I haven't changed my mind, but I'm trying to think about new or different ways of going about it, you know? Someone said to me early on, "You should identify boards that you want to go after and go speak to some of the people on it". And [name] said yeah that's probably not a bad way of doing it, find somebody that knows somebody, that sort of thing. So I need to do that next. But you have to have time to do that.

When used to make sense of the difficulties they faced getting board roles, the same 'lean in' discourse emerges in women's accounts. This extract is an example of how candidates' strategies (also seen in the previous chapter's discussion around networking) are discursively used here as a way to make sense of the barriers they face in the process; of raising the issue with the process overall, but emphasising the need to find new ways 'around it', rather than challenging it. While Martha describes the situation as frustrating, her solution is to come up with new strategies for targeting specific boards and broadening her network, and identifies the problem as her not having time to network, rather than challenging the need to have connections, or noting that she does not know the people she is trying to contact. This means adopting an individualised discourse to make sense of her frustration and lack of success, contributing to her feeling she needs to work harder and find a new way to seek roles. This is seen again in her third interview:

> **Scarlett**: Has your motivation for doing it waned? Or does it come and go in phases, or?
>
> **Martha [third interview]**: No, it hasn't waned at ALL, it's just gotten to a stage where I don't know whether I am (.) frustrated? I'm in a lull? (.) = I'm going to give up? = I'm, you know, I was about to say, I was about to turn negative (.) I do wonder about that. But that's not in my nature; I'm a fighter. I am a fighter. And I get angry with myself, I shouldn't say angry, I get disappointed with myself if I start to think that way. I have to grab hold of the situation and [think], "Look around you, look at how grateful you should be, for everything"

So I do that, I force myself to do that. But I am in a bit of a crossroads, I really am. You know, it's either I just give up trying and see what's happening; I do the work with these guys [current employer], and I will continue to network, and if it happens it happens and if it doesn't it doesn't (.) I'm on the cusp of something, some big change. And the conventional way that I've been trying to do something, which is what this is all about, Is so not working, so I've gotta change direction. And I don't know how to do that. And I'm hoping, with these advisors I might be able to find that path.

In this extract Martha again internalises her failure, describing it in terms of pathological emotions: the frustration she feels in relation to the process and her lack of success. This is discursively treating her emotions as something she has to address in the appropriate way, by coming up with more practical 'solutions' and continuing to push for roles. This draws on the same 'lean in' discourse and highlights their neoliberal, individualised features; she refers to her need to be strategic and focused while downplaying her negative emotions. The evocation of herself as a fighter, who has to battle and continue to work hard is a starkly neoliberal discourse, particularly in its reference to her need to be 'grateful' for what she has achieved thus far and continuing to try different strategies to work around the system, rather than challenging the need to conduct these strategies. Martha also describes a kind of 'meta-shame' (Probyn, 2005): she feels angry or frustrated *because* she is angry and frustrated, and in the interview she seems to be encouraging herself to handle these emotions in a more appropriate way. Charlotte similarly describes her feelings of frustration with the process:

Charlotte [second interview]: So, I think (.) I'm feeling that I'm resigned to (.) it's just going to take a lot of time? (.) and you've just got to keep plugging away at it.
Scarlett: Yeah.
Charlotte: but there are moments when you just go, "God, this is so hard"
Scarlett: Yeah.
Charlotte: is it really the right thing to do? But I don't want to ditch (.) I feel like I've ditched you know being CEO of a FTSE 100 because I don't want to do that anymore and it's all that I'd ever wanted in my life (.) and now something that just feels that it's quite difficult, I think I've just got to keep plugging away at it but it's um. It is VERY difficult, more difficult than I thought.
Scarlett: Yeah.

> **Charlotte**: Because there's no road map, you don't actually know and there's not (.) there doesn't seem to be any (.) there's NO RULES.

Charlotte, like Martha, draws on a 'lean in' discourse to make sense of her frustration with the process, emphasising her determination to keep pushing forward. The solution she presents is to keep working, even while there is a lack of certainty that this is what will lead to success. This is justified further in her account by the insistence that it is going to take a lot of time and hard work, a discourse that is mobilised alongside a contradiction that the process is unpredictable, and she does not know how to navigate it, because there are 'no rules'. The internalisation of failure in Charlotte's account also emerges in how she references her previous decision to 'ditch' being a CEO of a FTSE 100, using this to reaffirm her determination to continue 'plugging away' to get a non-executive board role.

When describing their experiences of the appointment process overall and making sense of their relative successes and failures, women in the study draw on neoliberal discourses reminiscent of the 'lean in' rhetoric common in corporate, gendered elites. Their narratives place them as neoliberal heroines, battling against their internal barriers (both bodily and mental) to push for board roles and make their own success. This is often couched in terms of their ability to persist, learning the rules of the game and how to play by them. Additionally, this relates the individualised success story to their ability to network and get appointed, rather than specifically to a meritocratic discourse where they are simply the best person for the role, recruited through a rational or objective process. These narratives have the discursive effect of downplaying bias and the struggles they face in the process; either pre-empting (or not allowing space for) criticism of the process. Often their accounts referred to their career histories too, and it should be highlighted that these women are already highly successful. These success narratives, although related to seeking board roles, also connect to their wider sense-making discourses.

6.4. Sitting Back

In contrast to the 'leaning in' discourse commonly adopted by the women, men drew on a 'sitting back' discourse to account for success and failure. They rarely described success as something they actively sought or pushed for, instead emphasising how they were approached by appointing boards, and putting emphasis on how 'out of the blue' the connections were, or the (apparently) little effort they had put in.

> **Simon [second interview]**: And one night I got a phone call (.) from somebody at [search firm] funnily enough ^about six o'clock I think^ and, "I know you don't know me, but I would like to talk to you about a possible job." Long story short, I went to see him at their offices in Mayfair and the largest glass of scotch I remember seeing in quite some time. We sat down in this room, a very comfortable room AND THEY PITCHED THE [COMPANY NAME] job to me and I liked the sound of it very much indeed and I then I accepted it or interviewed da de da did the process and got offered the job at [company name]. So (.) I took that, obviously (.).

The language Simon uses to describe how he was contacted for a board role evokes a kind of historical or traditional Old Boys' network or gentleman's club, drawing on characteristics typically associated with 'gentlemanly capitalism' (Augar, 2001): the offices in Mayfair, scotch, and a comfortable room. This has the effect of emphasising his elite identity and status. These markers also point to informality in the process, through placing it in opposition to a formal meeting or interview, and emphasising how comfortable he was and is in the space. In contrast to women's accounts, Simon's is also notably absent of any active role on his part: he constructs himself as a passive recipient of success and of someone with elite status. This is also shown in his emphasis on the person saying they 'don't know' him before making contact; it is interesting how not being known to the headhunter is used as a means to emphasise his high status, while for women, not being known to the right people is presented as a significant barrier.

The difference between how Simon describes the headhunter and how they are described in women's accounts is also notable: in women's accounts the headhunter is described as passive: a

resource to be accessed, but where women themselves have to put in the work. In Simon's account, the headhunter is someone who contacts him. Placing this in the wider contextual research on headhunters, this may suggest that men's accounts of the relationship between candidates and headhunters is more aligned with how headhunters themselves describe the relationship, as they are not typically interested in candidates who approach them (cf. Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2012; Holgersson, 2012; Wirz, 2014); it also suggests that men do not need to emphasise their 'work' in the same way women do.

Simon's account also provides an example of how men in particular were notably vague in describing the specific stages of the board appointment process. I noted when conducting the interviews that men were often reluctant to provide detail. In Simon's account for example, he starts by saying he's accepted the role, then almost immediately qualifying this by saying he 'interviewed' for it, despite there being little discussion of an interview, and providing little explanation as to what the interview process entailed. His use of the phrase 'da de da' also acts as a way to brush over, or perhaps actively avoid, discussing the steps of the appointment process, dismissing it as unimportant for discussion, despite it being the focus for the research. The overall effect of the discourse is that he conflates his decision to take the role with their decision to appoint him, implying that once he decided he was interested he was, seemingly immediately, appointed.

> **Ian [first interview]**: I happened just to mention [that I am looking] to a friend of mine who happened to be the senior partner of one of the major law firms; a guy I was at university with and who was a personal friend. He happened to be talking with [a board] whom they advised […]They used him as a little bit, as companies do, and it's interesting, actually, they just asked him, they said, "We've got a Chairman retiring", someone was becoming Chairman and they had a spare role on the board. What they needed really was someone from the City. […] He just so happened to say, "Funny you should say that but my friend [Ian] who by the way comes from very close to [town where the company is based] just said that he's been looking and would like to look at something". So he put me in touch with them and I went down. To this day I laugh because it's the type of company I really enjoy because we had the interview in a pub, and I thought that was a great way to start. I think

they were traditional [industry]; I was this strange four-tailed, two-headed chap from the City, and we got on like a house on fire.

In Ian's account we see similar references made to the informality in the process: the conversation that led to appointment was held in a pub, and again the emphasis is placed on how comfortable and enjoyable he found it. It is also notable here, even more so than with Simon, that he refers to luck and happenstance: Ian repeatedly states that he 'happened to' mention he was looking for a role, and his friend 'happened to' know someone that could offer him something suitable. This discourse acts as a way of eliding the networked connections that led to the meeting arising, ascribing the success to a series of coincidences, rather than the active and deliberate actions of the three people (men) involved. Like Simon, Ian's description of the interview and success is fairly short: 'he put me in touch with them and I went down …we got on like a house on fire'. This discursively attempts to reduce the interview process to a minimal explanation. This downplays the active role they have in the process, and again ascribes success to something that happens *to* him, rather than as a result of his deliberate and active seeking.

The sitting back discourse was also present in the accounts of men who were yet to be appointed. This provided a way for the men to make sense of not yet being successful, and to retrospectively and proactively justify their networking practices.

Scarlett: So do you have any kind of plan for how you're going to move forward from here?
Anthony: I've never really been a planner I think (.) really milling around is what does it.
Scarlett: So that will be the plan?
Anthony: Yeah. Do a lot of milling around. [I did] management by milling around; business development by milling around; portfolio by milling around. And actually the 'milling about process' and the being patient and knowing it will come to you, seems to be a much more effective way of getting on boards. Provided you are of the calibre that is going to be approached and once you are in the band of being, "Yes that person has the right level of experience", you actually do just seem to have to bob around, being in the right spaces,

> existing in the world until the right position comes up for you and then it will come and you will be the right one for it.

In response to questions around his planning, Anthony draws on the sitting back discourse by saying he will be 'milling around': a kind of mantra or repeated discourse that he uses to make sense of the process overall, which he places seemingly in opposition to planning. He starts by asserting that milling around is 'what does it', connecting his personal strategy to an assertion that it will lead to success, in a similar way to the leaning in discourse, but used here specifically in opposition to my use of the word 'plan', which he attempts to deliberately avoid. In both his rejection of planning and his insistence that success comes from 'milling around', he refers both to his career background and an internal sense of self or subjectivity to assert that it is the best way of going about the process: not only is it the best route to non-exec success, it is part of 'who he is'. Similarly, by stating that he has *never* been a planner, he implies that throughout his entire career, successes have come from 'milling around' and not planning. This, then, combines an internal subjectivity, his perspective on what has led to success in his career, and his attitudes towards the search for a role all under the same rubric: being patient, not needing to push forward, and success coming to him.

This is similar to the discourses that emerged in how men make sense of their networking practices, where they argue that leaning back and being patient is the best way to get a role, and in this way present themselves as deliberately passive. Rather than articulating this as a deliberate strategy however, it is described as something they do unconsciously, as part of 'who they are'. This contrasts to women's accounts, where they outline specific strategies that they have learned, to 'play the game'. Their discourses present the process as a result of passivity that they perform unconsciously, a notably different discursive strategy to women.

The sit back discourse also necessarily relies upon a conviction that the individual mobilising it believes (or wishes to emphasise) that he will eventually be appointed; it does not challenge the conviction he has in the likelihood of his success. Anthony states that success is about 'knowing' the

opportunity will come to you, which he relates to having the right *level* of experience. This again uses the right experience discourse described in the earlier chapter to explain why someone would be successful, and connects it to the person (i.e. him) being the right calibre of person. As in Simon's discussion earlier regarding his success, he presents himself as in an elite position, with the director role seen as a foregone conclusion or *sine qua non;* a taken-for-granted part of his career that will come, and for which he just has to be patient. This is in stark contradiction to the women's highly strategic networking strategies and their sense-making, where success is attributed to hard work and failure motivates them to push harder to get roles. This does not allow discursive space for any notion of failure. Failure, in the men's narratives, is cast as success that has not happened yet, or as the result of a deliberate decision to approach things slowly, rather than as a result of their own failures.

6.5. Being Choosy

Another way that the 'sit back' discourse was mobilised by candidates was through describing themselves as 'choosy' about which roles they would pursue or take: explaining that they had not been successful because they had only been interested in a small number of roles relative to how many they were approached for.

> **Scarlett**: So apart from phone calls, have you had any other short-listings or interviews for positions that you then didn't get?
>
> **Oliver [second interview]**: Things did start flowing, I didn't pursue any, as I said, there was [*sic*.] two in particular I was eager to pursue but ruled them out, so I was very picky.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Oliver**: The only interview process I went through, getting in front of a company was [Company name].
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, absolutely.
>
> **Oliver**: So, a hundred percent success rate I guess, you could say.
>
> **Scarlett**: Very well done, very well done.
>
> **Oliver**: So and a nought percent failure rate.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah HEHE
>
> **Oliver**: But you know, it's kind of like that.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Oliver**: No, it's not kind of like that, I could, it might not have worked and I would have bided my time for something else.

In describing his overall perception of the process and his search for roles, Oliver presents himself as very selective in what kinds of roles he wants, emphasising both his 'choosiness' and his 'patience'. His insistence that 'things did start flowing' but that he 'didn't pursue any' of these opportunities is mobilised seemingly to suggest that being interviewed or shortlisted for (only) two roles was a decision he made, rather than representing a lack of success. Despite my explicitly asking him about other positions and trying to move away from discussing his success with the role he got, he repeatedly discusses the roles he did get, and describes it as 'a hundred percent success rate' (and a 'nought percent failure rate', to reaffirm the point). This has the discursive effect of presenting

relatively few approaches by boards as a sign of his *success* and his decision to be choosy, and not as personal failure; similarly, he describes how he might not have been successful and casts himself as being patient, stating that if it had not led to success he would have 'bided his time' for something else. In terms of how the process is presented, this does not challenge the system for his lack of success, nor does it locate it as his responsibility, as in the women's accounts. It is internalised, insofar as it is perceived as a result of his decision to be picky, but not to the extent that he is taking personal responsibility for success or failure, and without challenging the notion that he will be successful, and is a desirable candidate for board roles.

Candidates offered other explanations for being choosy:

> **Daniel [second interview]**: I mean, so they have got to be sure that it's building the right (.) so I have had one meeting, two meetings with the CEO, I am in the middle of doing due diligence now on them and their finances and structure and issues to decide whether it's a job that I want to do. Since you are personally liable, and your reputation is (.) and for me – because it is the first one – who I choose, I mean I have got to be realistic of this size and reputation given my background, but I have also got to make sure that I don't get into bed with somebody who is not going to be well thought of, or is already not well thought of, because that doesn't help.

In this extract Daniel explains specifically why he feels he needs to be choosy when deciding whether to take on a board role he has nearly been successful in gaining, relating it to personal liability and reputation, something he sees as more important because it is his first position. This again draws on the ideal board member discourse, as it connects his need to be 'realistic' with his level of experience, and shows the strength of the previous board experience discourse for making sense of the process, and for providing an interpretive repertoire for his identity. This also may be mobilised as a form of self-affronting justification for failure before-the-fact; presenting an explanation for why he might not 'choose' the role even if he is offered one, and even before he has been offered one. This discourse function may also in part be due to the longitudinal research design: in this interview Daniel is needing to justify why he has not been successful, and may be setting up an explanation in advance of why he might not have been successful by the time of the next interview. The need to be choosy is

counteracted by his perception of himself as someone with no previous experience, with the inference that not having previous board experience means that he cannot be choosy, or as choosy as he would like to be. Even within this discourse it is also notable that he describes, describing the process as him being approached and deciding what he wants, not as him actively seeking roles. The concern with his reputation also forms part of the narrative.

> **Scarlett**: Is that something that you were advised on as well, about being choosy about who you go for? Was that advice from people who had been through it?
>
> **Gary [third interview]**: Yes. It was unhelpful advice, but it's (.): well, you need to get the balance right, you need to recognise the realities of [the situation], you need to get the first one, because it turns out when you are on 'the circuit', as they like to call it, you get 'phoned up. So you need to be realistic about what you have got, what the skills are, what you are likely to get, but you also need to make sure you don't get involved with a deadbeat. And, you know, you have to come to that conclusion by your own due diligence; you know. Does this smell right; does it feel right?

Similarly to Daniel, Gary's explanations of the process here emphasise the need to be choosy to ensure that they are not taking on roles that are unsuitable, or roles they were not completely sure they wanted. Both acknowledged that there was a need to be realistic: these are not the same explicitly self-assured discourses we saw in Simon, Ian and Oliver. However, they still adopted this sit back discourse, which allowed them to present themselves as able to choose the role that suited them. The way(s) they describe how they go about 'due diligence' on companies they are interested in are similar to characteristics of 'fit' discussed in the earlier chapter: Gary's description of a company 'smelling' or 'feeling right' uses highly informal language and is vague about what exactly he is looking for; similarly, while Daniel discusses due diligence in relation to finances and structure, he then uses a colloquial expression ('I don't [want to] get into bed with somebody who is not going to be well thought of').. Both these descriptions present the decision as important, but one that is done almost on 'gut instinct' or a feeling about a company, something often seen in other studies with regards to how directors are appointed, and which reflect the findings of this research, too. This again re-affirms Gary's sense of self-belief, as it relies on a conviction that he is able to judge the value of the board

simply by instinct. This suggests that while there is some reliance on having the right experience or being the right kind of company, when it comes to the final decision-making, it is done largely on informal assessment.

Most crucially, these accounts again draw on a 'sit back' discourse, where candidates describe themselves as highly discerning in their choices, and wanting to ensure they do not make the wrong decision. This discourse was far more commonly used by men, and sits in stark contrast with the women's accounts, who describe themselves as far less discerning. Women were more likely to discuss feeling the need to push themselves forward for roles, as shown earlier in how Charlotte, Eleanor and Karen describe an apparent need to convince the headhunter that they would want to take the roles.

Although the sit back discourse was used almost exclusively by men, it was occasionally used by those women who found it easy to get roles, and who felt concerned that they had taken on too many.

> **Linda [second interview]**: [If I get those two] I'm full, at least for a year until I've BEDDED DOWN. They bombard you with offers, and you've gotta make judgments (.) I've got a little bit of consultancy, some bits and pieces, happy to do that. If I don't get the other two, I would probably, probably still sit there and see what comes to me. Because the, I'm seeing [headhunter] this afternoon and I know they're going to say the same as the chap at [headhunter] said, which is "wait". Sit back. Because the difference between exec and non-executive is rotations. Now, if I use up my dance card all in one go, let's say that even if I wanted to, which I don't, but if [company] came up to me next may and said "we're looking for a Chair, or even a member", I wouldn't be able to do it because I'll have filled my portfolio, and I'll have finished them within five years. So I'm having to sit back and go, okay, stop.

The way that Linda describes this need to 'sit back', be choosy, and make sure she is taking on the right kinds of roles is similar in its outcome to that of Daniel and Gary, in the sense that she acknowledges the need to 'be choosy'. Her justification for this is different than in their accounts: in

Linda's case it is related to her success, describing herself as being in high demand, and therefore needing to make sure she does not fill her portfolio too quickly, preventing her from taking other roles. A 'dance card' is a colloquial expression referring to a tradition where a woman's dance card was used to record the names of the gentlemen with whom she intended to dance with at a formal ball; someone's dance card being full implies that even though they are interested, they have no time slots for another person. For Linda, the need to 'be choosy' is therefore strategic in the sense that she does not want to fill her portfolio too quickly (and be unable to take on other roles), rather than seeking to present herself as a discerning person. The way her discourse is mobilised is different to men's; it is also highly gendered imagery, in which the woman holds the dance card and waits to be approached by (presumably eager) men. Linda's choosiness, rather than being a strategy to increase her chances of success in getting the role in the way that men describe, is still compatible with her 'lean in' discourse, despite her choice of imagery.

6.6. It's easier for women

Another discourse that men drew on to make sense of the process, and which also relates to the 'sit back' discourse, was the assertion that it is easier for women than men to get roles, as a result of the women on boards agenda.

> **Anthony [second interview]**: I also think, I'm just going to have to wait it out. Whilst positions come up; there are a lot of them, there is a lot of supply, ^a lot of supply^.
>
> **Scarlett**: Is that something you feel, that actually there is a lot of people in a similar position to you?
>
> **Anthony**: ^oh yeah, there is a lot of people, a lot of people^, either because they are in my position or because they have decided to step away ^from being on the executive side^, they may have been encouraged to do it by the company they're in. There is a lot of different reasons. And it's also about relevant knowledge as well. The guy last night, [Name], he is on the board of [FTSE 100 company] and that's something that [Fortune 500[26] company] have supported him with and helped him with so you know, there's (.) you can see how he would fit and bring a different perspective into a board room from a technology aspect point of view. So the longer it goes on for me (.) what are you bringing to the board?
>
> **Scarlett**: So, I suppose in that way it's good that you still have the fulltime role and that you are still very current?
>
> **Anthony**: Well, that would be (.) the remuneration is quite, it's a major part of what I do. That's something that you can kind of latch on to and say "Well, that's my area of expertise".
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, of course, which makes you quite an easy candidate for it?
>
> **Anthony**: Yes, for certain types of roles. But then they come up, so say there is a chair of a remuneration committee; what's the candidate list like, and that's an easy place to get a female. So then you come back to the start point again.

In the beginning of this extract Anthony uses the sit back discourse in relation to being patient, stating specifically that he needs to 'wait it out', because of the increased number of candidates now looking for roles, most notably women. This idea of a 'swelled pool' was common in men's and women's narratives, and for many it was related to an assertion that in recent years there are many more aspiring non-executive directors looking for roles; here Anthony refers to it as another external explanation to account for him having not gained a role yet. This reaffirms his conviction that he will

[26] An annual list of the five hundred largest US industrial corporations, as measured by gross income.

be successful, by placing the blame on a factor he cannot control (and one that cannot be verified). This initial assertion that there are more candidates than before is notably gender-neutral; he does not start by stating there are more women and instead relates it to there being more people 'like him'. It is notable therefore that he then discuss his area of expertise ('it's also about relevant knowledge') referring to the right experience discourse, and suggesting he has not been successful due to not fitting a specific niche, before finally stating that this is an 'easy place to get a female'. This therefore draws on both the right experience and easier for women discourse, in addition to an assertion that there are too many aspiring directors, to account for the difficulty he is facing getting roles. This attributes the failure to factors outside his control, insinuating that his lack of success is due to boards needing to get women onto boards, and to a presumption that the remuneration chair is an 'easy' place for them to do that.[27]

> **Stephen [second interview]**: They [headhunters and NED peers] all said, "You're just the right credentials for the chairman of audit committee, that you should, you know, find this (.) you'll find the right thing, just give it time" […]
>
> **Stephen**: I was kind of a pretty decent candidate, the only (.) as I said, the only one bit of feedback that stuck in my mind was and it wasn't feedback, it was sort of an opinion or anecdote or whatever–
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, of course.
>
> **Stephen**: [They said] "If you were a woman, you would be walking straight in".
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah, absolutely.
>
> **Stephen**: And give it time.

It is striking how Stephen, in a similar way to Anthony, simultaneously relates his conviction that he will be successful to his experience and career background, while affirming that his failure so far is as a result of the increased focus on getting women into roles. Much like the men's accounts already noted, he has conviction in his own ability and relates that to his experience being highly desired by boards; his career background represents the 'right experience'. His lack of success is placed firmly

[27] It should be highlighted that there is no evidence to suggest that remuneration chairs are more likely to be women; rather, it suggests that his perspective is that women are being chosen for roles that he feels he is qualified for. It acts as a way to make sense of his failure, and place the whole process in these terms.

away from his own success narrative: even the reaffirmation that it was not feedback (i.e. unrelated to his ability) but an opinion, but nevertheless one that he reproduces in the interview. His mobilisation of this discourse is direct and explicit; rather than hinting at a preference for women, he states outright that if he was a woman he would be 'walking straight in', evoking an idea that there *are* women walking straight into such roles, and that he has been told this by a headhunter. This downplays the convoluted appointment process, and maintains that the only thing preventing him from securing a role is that he is not a woman.

> **Benjamin [third interview]**: So, I started looking in that sort of time frame and it was pretty tough (.) Pretty tough for men to get roles = within that time frame. One very well-known city headhunter, female, said to me, "Ben, if you wore a skirt, I'd get you to any boardroom you want, any day (.) but at the minute there's a flood of women being recruited. Bide your time, you'll get the right appointment."
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Benjamin**: That really sums up the mood during that time because there was that big push (.) there was the Davies report and (.) was other committees and things that came out.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yes, of course.
>
> **Benjamin**: And it was predominantly or significantly female-focused recruitment at the time.
>
> **Scarlett**: Yeah.
>
> **Benjamin**: So, positive recruitment. Positive discrimination.

Again, we see the role that patience and sitting back plays in Benjamin's discourse: he is told by a headhunter to do so, because boards are prioritising gender diversity and appointing women. The stress he places on the headhunter being female is also notable, emphasizing that women also think boards are looking for women, and perhaps to suggest that it is not just his opinion, and not just the opinion of men. The implication that women share his view is mobilised seemingly to pre-empt and challenge any critique. His describing it as 'that time frame' again indicates that it is related to the need to appoint women in order to satisfy a quota or meet the target: he refers explicitly to the Davies review as an instigator for 'female-focused' recruitment. He then even more explicitly calls it positive discrimination, thus placing his discourse within Diversity and Inclusion rhetoric and language (Noon, 2007), but drawing on its negative connotations to criticise its effects. It should be highlighted

that during the 'time frame' Benjamin is referring to, 70 per cent of new board roles in the FTSE 350 were given to men; while women may have been more sought out than in previous years, they were not the majority of appointments.

Andrew draws on a similar narrative to Anthony, although in his account it was another NED that told him it would be easier to get a role if he were a woman:

> **Andrew [second interview]**: He [another NED] said why don't we have lunch and discuss it, so this was more initially for me to say: "You know the market, you know how people choose NEDs, here is my background, is it feasible to imagine that there's enough interest in someone like me to find some NED roles? And the feedback was: one, It's a pity you're not a woman, because frankly there's (.) a bias at that point, because boards are completely unrepresented in that regard, and that means that it is nothing to do with your background particularly, but the focus is so much for a re-balance, because many people are not interested in more eclectic, risky candidates, because their first problem is that they don't have a balanced board.

Like Linda's account of her husband earlier in the chapter and Stephen and Anthony's description of the headhunter's feedback, it is notable how throughout the research candidates use other people in their narratives as mouthpieces or proxy representatives to explain their perspective, and in this case as a way to back up their belief that it is easier for women. Discursively this makes it easier for them to describe, and may also be a way to defend against perceived criticism, claiming it is not necessarily their opinion, just something they have been told. As with Stephen above, Andrew reiterates that there is no problem with his background (i.e. his ability to get board roles), again reiterating the idea of the ideal board member and drawing on the right experience discourse. Apparently, his only barrier is not being female, and that relates to the boards need to 're-balance'. This need is not necessarily criticised; his account acknowledges that lack of balance needs to be addressed, and he is therefore not challenging the system *per se*, but how it affects him. In contrast to Stephen, whose experience and background fits 'perfect' board member ideal described earlier, Tom found his experience less typically desired for boards (he was the candidate who described putting his HR experience into a

'business' perspective) and hence his conviction that he is a riskier or more 'eclectic' candidate. Even so, in this narrative the need for boards to appoint women is the overriding discourse and reason for his lack of success; this therefore becomes the primary failure narrative despite contradicting other difficulties he faces.

In relation to the belief that it is easier for women due to the focus on board diversity, it was remarkable how the men incorporated this belief into their narratives, while also espousing support for board diversity.

> **Anthony [second interview]**: I have to say I'm fairly philosophical, because I absolutely support the idea that we need more females on board, you know, I've seen that and I have to acknowledge probably that over the duration of my career, which is 36 years, that men have probably had the advantage so now the pendulum has now swung the other way, well good on the females. But that is something that obviously I am wrestling with. I almost sort of feel that if I was a woman at this point I probably would have been welcomed with open arms and they would have seen through my perceived lack of corporate board responsibilities and I would probably (.) have two or three non-executive roles lined up already. (.) So, that's just an added frustration, but as I say I am philosophical about the whole thing.

Anthony's insistence that he is positive about the need to increase the number of women on boards is particularly striking in how it is mobilised here alongside an insistence that it is easier for women, and relating that to his lack of success so far. Describing himself as 'philosophical' acts as a way to sandwich his less positive feeling with an overall 'belief' that it must be a positive thing that more women are being appointed. This ABA discursive structure offers a more politically correct attitude in line with diversity, followed by suggesting a negative outcome for him, and then following with another insistence that it is a good thing. This structure has been observed in other studies that explore how men talk about feminism (Riley, 2005); it acts as a disclaimer (Gill, 2000; Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) and it is clear Anthony is attempting to offer a criticism while seemingly aware that he must portray himself as positive about the issue. Like Andrew, he acknowledges that there are issues with his experience, and these were also explored in more detail in the ideal board member chapter;

however, in this particular extract from a later interview, he now implies that the career background would be unimportant if he were female. This again represents a complex contradiction between the discourses of meritocracy and bias that is difficult to resolve.

> **Gary [third interview]**: What we've got at the moment, actually again, I'm a straight talker, I just like things said as they are (.) What we've done is we've actually changed the rules for admission of non-execs, in order to have more women on the board because there's not enough. And by the way, it's always difficult to get an executive director because they're so busy. I mean, we had one on a board I'm on, and she's heroic, I don't know how she has the time. I have no idea, there's times when she has to leave the board meeting and take calls and all that sort of stuff, so it's very, very hard. And I think what we've done, we've taken people out of the legal profession and the accounting profession, which never used to be considered as necessary for the board because they do different things, they don't run businesses. We've taken people out of the charity sector, we've taken people who are lower down the hierarchy and that sort, and you know what I'm saying? I'm saying that is fine by me, because actually that is quite interesting.

The way that Gary draws on the easier for women discourse is slightly different to the others discussed in this section, partly because he gained a FTSE 100 role during the research period, and it is therefore not mobilising it to make sense of failure; it is notable that the strength of the discourse is similar even when the discourse is used for a different function. In this account, he hints at a criticism of the women on boards agenda overall for how it has changed the composition of boards, arguing that it has meant the appointment of candidates with less executive experience. Caveating his statement at the beginning with 'I'm a straight talker' suggests again that he is applying a disclaimer before he says it, in a similar discursive structure to other men's use of the easier for women discourse. The anecdote around the woman he sits on a board with has an interesting discursive function: by highlighting her ability to be a good director, he singles her out as an example of how successful women can be as directors, but she is presented as an anomaly, with a kind of 'superwoman' rhetoric, that others or singles out her experience. It is also notable that the reasons he gives for her being 'heroic' are limited to her ability to balance an executive role and a non-executive role, something that is commonly done by many directors across the FTSE. That he praises her ability to do both

again acts to single her out, offering praise (perhaps even patronisingly) for doing something that would be normal for a (male) director to do, and perhaps not worth of comment.

While Gary does not use the easier for women discourse to make sense of his own failure, he highlights that the increased appointment of women has altered the kinds of people taken on for board roles; this suggests another aspect of the right experience discourse, where he states that people who have the 'wrong' experience are now being appointed, and that this is as a result of the focus on women. The implication that women are, by nature, further down the 'hierarchy' (except the exception that he raises, to prove the rule that you cannot get women who are 'up' the hierarchy), amounts to, arguably, sexist criticism, and again relates a wider (negative) change to the women on boards agenda. This is then notably caveated or sandwiched, again using the ABA structure (Riley, 2005) as in Anthony account, to state that it is 'fine by him' because it makes it more 'interesting'. His overall narrative is highly contradictory: he is critical of the influence of the gender diversity agenda because it leads to the rules of admission changing, while maintaining that it is, overall, a good thing.

> **Gary [third interview]**: In many ways I think it's actually quite, quite refreshing to have that (.) different view. But you have to recognise it's a different set of experiences. And is it what a board wants? You know? I just think, so with the [company] thing, if you had had someone who's not been on a board before, who, say, came out of a law firm or charity or not for profit sector, would they have been able to deliver a message about the management of that company? And have the courage to stick to that? And do you know what? I'm not saying "no" on that, I'm saying, you know, I think you probably get that MORE out of someone who has been through the rough and tumble of getting to the top of a company and being an executive and being on boards, as you will from somebody who has not been in that kind of slightly rough and tumble private sector. But that's what we've done, but I personally welcome it.

Gary's narrative in the third interview around the same issue is remarkably similar to his second interview, again suggesting it acts as a resource that he draws on to make sense of the process, and repeats in the research interview. In this extract he uses the same discursive structure, stating that it

is ‘refreshing’ to have a different point of view, but that it is a necessarily different view, before going on to offer an example of a board where this might not work. The example he offered was a high-profile governance failure, and his implication is that someone who does not have the ‘right experience’ may not be able to challenge the executive directors. This again draws on the right experience discourse, but connects it with the right personality, constructing an overall rationality that people who are not ‘ideal’ in terms of their experience will not be able to be good directors. Again we see the discursive shift and contradictions between raising it as a potential problem and contradicting the narrative by saying that he ‘isn’t saying “no”’, in a remarkably similar way to the disclaimer ‘I’m not being sexist, but…’ Gill finds in her research (1992). Finally, the account ends with another iteration of the same discursive structure: he raises a problem with the process, before concluding that he ‘welcomes’ the change. Overall, these accounts suggest an awareness that it is socially unacceptable to be opposed to women on boards (and indeed this is likely influenced by the knowledge that women on boards is the subject of the research) but also wanting to describe the negative effect of increased appointment of women.

6.7. Conclusion: Gendered sensemaking on the route to the boardroom

This chapter has explored how candidates make sense of the overall appointment process, and in particular success and failure. This reveals how candidates use gendered discourses to explain the process and how it operates, and how these have enduring, discursive effects on how the process is perceived and maintained.

Women’s accounts of success and failure draw on starkly neoliberal discourses. Women seeking roles often describe themselves as having battled against barriers, both internal and external, in order to be successful. Internally, their accounts often contained examples of feeling uncomfortable or unsure and facing a challenge, but explaining how they pushed forward and ‘battled through’, ultimately leading to success. This is also seen in how they describe the external barriers they tackled, through ‘playing the system’, for instance by making the process easy for the headhunters or being

active in their networking. This presents the process as something that is undesirable (and at times 'pointless'), but also highly necessary, and the inevitable route to success. By characterising it as such, they are criticising the process without challenging it. The way candidates draw on these narratives also portrays them as highly active and instrumental in creating the circumstances for their success, drawing on a neoliberal, self-responsibility framework where they are the creators of their own successes.

Women in the research also used similar discourses to make sense of failure; often the difficulties they were facing caused a great deal of frustration and negative feelings towards the process and how it operates. The reliance on networking for roles presents a dilemma for unsuccessful candidates, as the only solution they have is to 'lean in' and network harder or more, with little access to boards through other routes. The intangibility of success and lack of 'map' or 'rules' was particularly evident in women's accounts: they expressed a desire to push forward and work harder, but a lack of clarity about what that could entail. This means that any challenge or critique of the process and how it operates was silenced. Instead women often described difficulties as a result of personal failure. In these cases, they often present solutions and plans for continuing to search for roles, placing the responsibility for success and failure on themselves, with the only solution being to work harder or smarter.

These neoliberal discourses are reminiscent of those presented in the corporate feminism or 'lean in' phenomena (Rottenberg, 2014), which encourages women to break through the glass ceiling by tackling internal barriers, such as lack of confidence or conviction in their own abilities. This has been criticised for implying that the primary barriers to being successful in senior roles that women face can be surmounted provided they have the knowledge and internal conviction to do so, and are prepared to work hard (Foster, 2016), something we can see emerging in these women's discourses. Director recruitment may then indicate an area where the expectations placed on women to be the creators of their own success are adopted and internalised by women as they go through the process.

As critics of the lean in discourse have noted, these seemingly feminist discourses have been co-opted and have the effect of placing the responsibility for failure back on to individual women, detracting from the potential for systemic or structural change. Given that the non-executive director recruitment is marked by its gender biases and opacity, it is problematic to see women adopting these issues as their own, if it is preventing them from challenging the issues inherent in the system.

These discourses are also, problematically and persistently, meritocratic, emphasizing how they achieved success on their own terms, through highly individualised narratives; however, while they attribute success to their own ability, this is focused on networking strategies and the appointment process, through highlighting their ability to understand what would lead to success and 'play the system'. This locates their behaviour within a meritocratic framework, but only in relation to learning the rules of the appointment process, and does not therefore argue for a rigorous or meritocratic process of appointment. Women very rarely related their success or failures to their background, experience, or ability to be a good director. Rather than this representing a meritocracy where the roles go to the best candidates, then, this suggests that the roles go to the candidates who work the hardest *within* the appointment process, and therefore women can succeed provide they learn the rules of the game, but are not able to challenge the rules themselves.

Much like the discourses candidates used to describe networking practices in the previous chapter, we see a stark contrast between women's highly active accounts and men's very passive accounts of the appointment process. The men's accounts made sense of their success through 'leaning back' and not pushing for roles: instead, they described being found, being patient and being choosy. When depicting how they had been recruited to roles, they rarely described their active role in the process, instead using narratives that outlined how they were contacted directly by headhunters or boards, and then appointed. In contrast to the women's detailed accounts of the stages of the appointment process, men also described a highly informal process. The emphasis on informality was particularly notable, as this separates it significantly from the expectations of a 'normal' job

interview, while women frequently drew parallels between director appointments and other areas of recruitment (something which similarly justifies the process operating as it does). This has the overall effect of emphasising signifiers of men's elite status and the unique aspects of elite recruitment, placing themselves in positions of power and as individuals who are contacted for roles, rather than the other way around.

The contradiction and co-existence of active and passive sense-making is particularly notable with regards to gender, as it is an inversion of the typical gendered expectations. Particularly in relation to the workplace and leadership, men are commonly seen as pushing forward and more active and direct, and women less able to do so. One suggestion for the inversion in this case is that already acknowledged above: the encouragement given to women to be more 'like men' in their leadership and networking styles may lead to their pushing themselves forward and 'leaning in' as a deliberate choice to go against the norms of their gender. With regards to the men, this passiveness in relation to the appointment process is attributed to several factors – their emphasis on being found, being patient and being choosy – and these all emphasise their elite status. As with the women's accounts this same discourse was used by successful candidates as well as those who had not yet been successful, as a way to explain their plans for continuing to search.

While women's failure narratives frequently referred to the work they had to continue to put in, men's simply accounted for their lack of success as either relating to their decision to be choosy about roles, or their need to be patient and wait for the right role to come to them, both of which rest on the notion that they are right for roles and will, eventually, be successful. Often this was couched in terms that related to their internal subjectivity: they were more likely to describe leaning back as being unconscious or part of 'who they are'. This allows them a way to maintain 'face' – the positive social value claimed during the interaction (Goffman, 1972) – and it is notable that the men worked hard to portray themselves as not really trying to get roles, while women more commonly portrayed themselves as working hard or needing to work harder. Men attribute their lack of success (so far) to

their decision to network 'patiently' ('correctly'), rather than trying a strategy and that strategy failing/not leading to success.

Although mobilised in a different way, men's accounts similarly located their experiences within a meritocratic discourse. While women's emphasised navigating the appointment process by learning how to 'play the game', men's accounts more commonly adopted discourses that emphasised how normal or natural the process is. These argue that the system of appointment *needs* to operate as it does in order for boards to attract the best directors, and appoint candidates that can be trusted with the business. This accounts for the need to choose people through personal recommendation (an inherently biased system, which they acknowledge). Their utilisation and attempted reclamation of the Old Boys' network as an interpretive repertoire acknowledges the existence of an elite recruitment mechanism, while claiming it is meritocratic and necessary to get the appropriate candidates. This acknowledges and justifies bias in a way that is discursively unavailable to the women; while women's discourses are also meritocratic and do not challenge the process, they less commonly *justify* the bias that occurs. This may suggest that men are less concerned with challenging the 'game' because it already works for them, and are less focused on upholding their own sense of personal success and getting there by merit. In contrast, women have to put in more discursive work to counteract the impression that they did not get their board roles due to merit.

A final discourse that candidates drew on to make sense of their experiences was the insistence that it was easier for women, as a result of the current focus on board diversity. While this was mentioned by some women in relation to their motivations for seeking board roles, as discussed in the earlier chapter, it was used here primarily by men in making sense of the difficulties they face. The 'easier for women discourse' informs candidates' decision to be patient, and therefore supports their overall perspective on the process, by offering another justification as to why they do not need to push forward for roles. The iteration that it is easier for women to be appointed is often mobilised

alongside a conviction in their own success, through emphasising how credible a candidate they are and arguing that it is *only* the preference for women that is acting as a barrier to their success.

The strength and commonality of this discourse in men's accounts was startling, both in those who used it as a way of making sense of failure and those who had been successful but also discussed the perceived preference for female board members. This was treated by both as an inevitable result of the board diversity targets, but the emphasis on patience may suggest that it is being perceived as short-term, and a trend that will be less significant should the prominence of board diversity reduce. It was also interesting how criticisms of the effect of board diversity initiatives were discussed tentatively; often this meant the candidate stressing that they were very positive about board diversity, before offering a criticism or suggesting a negative effect that it was presumed to have. These ranged from the changing composition of boards to the increased pool of potential candidates, or to references to women getting a great number of roles to satisfy the quota, but were often then concluded with an assurance that it was still a 'good thing'. This couching of gendered critique within a politically correct framework is common in men discussing feminist issues (Riley, 2005) and particularly in relation to the workplace, where diversity issues are often discussed very positively in certain areas (Kelan, 2014) while denigrated in others (Kelan, 2015).

Perhaps most problematically, the insistence that it is easier for women than men to get board roles has the enduring discursive effect of portraying women's success as primarily the result of board diversity targets, rather than related to their own ability or value as directors. This, like the lean in and sit back narratives that candidates use to make sense of the process, act as discursive distractions from the problems with the appointment process. The combination of these discourses as used to make sense of the process allows candidates to draw on certain aspects of meritocracy and pre-emptively defend the way it operates, while still acknowledging that the process does not operate meritocratically. These two contradictory narratives can thus be held by candidates simultaneously, and mobilised in their narratives to a number of discursive end, both of which allow individuals to

criticise the process without challenging it. While they can and do discuss certain aspects of the process that are not rigorous or meritocratic, this is addressed through other repertoires: for women it is presented as evidence for their ability to work hard to navigate the appointment process, and in men's accounts it is justified in meritocratic ways (such as needing directors that are known to the board), or seen as an inevitable part of board diversity initiative that may cease to be a focus when gender diversity is not so in the public eye. In all cases, however, any critique of the appointment process is obfuscated or played down.

7. Gendered discourses on the route to the boardroom

This thesis has provided a qualitative examination of the experiences of aspiring non-executive directors seeking appointments on corporate boards in the UK. It has explored how they make sense of the appointment process, how they locate themselves as candidates suitable for board roles, how they network to get roles, and how they make sense of success and failure. This reveals the presence of gendered discourses in how they make sense of the process, which may contribute to women's difficulty entering the boardroom. It has also revealed how candidates draw on wider social discourses to justify the appointment process, and how this makes it impervious to critique. In this final chapter I will review the key findings from the empirical chapters, and how they relate to the extant literature. I will also highlight the key contributions of the thesis, methodologically, theoretically, and in relation to policy and practice, and make recommendations for future research.

7.1. The ideal board member

In chapter four, The Discursive Construction of the Ideal Board Member, I examined how candidates describe the 'ideal' board member, and how this discursive construction emerges both explicitly and implicitly throughout the research interviews. The ideal board member is constructed around three key aspects: having the right experience, the right personality, and 'fit' with the board. First, the candidates emphasised that boards preferred candidates who have previously held, or currently hold, board roles (Brickley et al., 1999; Fahlenbrach et al., 2010; Fich and White, 2005; Zorn, 2004) or come from certain industry backgrounds. This builds on existing research that suggests women are not chosen for boards because they do not have the right human capital, as the areas of experience that the ideal has are more commonly held by men. It is a taken for granted assumption in candidates' accounts that having the right experience is highly important for boards, and that the criteria are inflexible and narrow. It therefore has a 'truth effect' (Gill, 2008), wherein its repetition and common sense nature make it difficult to challenge. It also shows the power of this discourse to dictate who is seen as 'ideal', where those from certain backgrounds – HR, legal and professional

services (which tend to have more women in senior roles) – are discursively constructed as not wanted by boards; they have the wrong experience. Where individuals hold what they felt to be functionally-identical roles in different industries, such as having been a senior partner in a law firm or an HR director, they describe struggling to translate this experience into the experience they feel boards are looking for. As such, these findings suggest that what is seen as the required board experience may be even more restrictive than the literature indicates, as in order to be seen as the 'right' experience, it has to be board experience of the *right kind*.

Second, this chapter also highlighted how the ideal board member was constructed as someone with the right personality traits, and how these traits are gendered, subjective and individualistic, and located within elite identity discourses. When describing how they felt they were suited to taking up board roles, candidates frequently emphasised their ability to make high-level strategic decisions, and to challenge the board. In women's accounts this frequently means emphasising traits more commonly associated with masculinity; similarly, traits such as risk-aversion – which has, albeit problematically (Roberts, 2015) been more readily associated with women – or being 'people focused' were played down. Both men and women from legal backgrounds emphasised needing to demonstrate that they are not risk-averse, like 'typical' lawyers (and, perhaps, 'typical' women). The emphasis on having the right personality suggests that boardroom may operate on norms of masculine and elite models of success, which candidates feel they need to show they fit.

Finally, the ideal board member was constructed as someone who is seen to 'fit' with the board, supporting the assertion in the wider literature that board appointments may be biased due to their reliance on subjective criteria and fit, which is often difficult to define (Hill, 1995; Pye, 2000; 2001; 2005). In these accounts, individuals frequently emphasise the importance of boards working together (like a 'dinner party' or an 'orchestra'), emphasising the importance of fit, in rational or meritocratic terms. What is most problematic concerning the presence and usage of these discourses in candidates' accounts is that they necessitate and legitimate a focus on subjective criteria under a rational or

meritocratic model. This is particularly problematic at board level, because the appointment process is largely based around the Chair of the board making the decision, affording them highly subjective decision-making around aspiring candidates, as observed in other studies (Holgersson, 2012; Wirz, 2014). The emphasis that candidates give to board members needing to have the right personality and fit with the board, may explicitly or implicitly justify the appointment process operating on highly subjective criteria, and afford it an impression of rationality and/or meritocracy. Because getting along with the other directors is treated as a vital part of the ability to do the role in candidates' accounts (as we saw in the literature, where 'fit' is seen as a crucial part of the directors' work) (Pye 2005), judging fit it is described as an essential part of the appointment process.

The reliance on fit and subjective criteria for assessment of candidates is often assumed to make the appointment process more difficult for women, or those who do not display similar personal traits to the directors on the board (Meriläinen *et al.,* 2013). Supporting this, this research reveals occurrences where women describe needing to balance a masculine model of success (downplaying femininity when meeting the board, for example) while also ensuring they are likeable, physically attractive, polished and groomed (McRobbie, 2005). This co-construction can be seen as a way for them to 'do gender well and differently' (Mavin and Grandy, 2011; 2012), simultaneously performing expressions of femininity and masculinity in their attempts to establish competence (Tienari *et al.*, 2012). The absence of similar discourses in men's accounts suggests that suggest that, unlike men, women *need* to perform gender 'correctly', balancing masculine and feminine traits (Kelan, 2010) to be deemed credible.

The value of conducting a discourse analysis comes from its cynical approach (Gill, 2000), and in asking what the function and effects of discourses are, rather than simply treating them as representative of truth. Rather than representing a one-size-fits-all model of what directors need to be successful, the ideal board member can be better understood as a form of discursive, job description impression management, which has been seen in other research into directors (Westphal, 2010).

Westphal argues that directors often characterise their role as 'highly complex, time consuming and demanding, and as requiring either extensive, specialised expertise in a particular area of corporate strategy, extensive general management experience, or both' (Westphal, 2010: p. 321), but that this often does not reflect the reality of the role (*ibid*., see also Fahlenbrach *et al*., 2010; Westphal, 1998; Westphal and Khunna, 2003). He concludes that this impression management is a way for directors to enhance the legitimacy of the role and their own status. In this research context, the construction of the ideal board member has both of these consequences: aspiring directors describe the role both as requiring specific, rare and elite traits (legitimising the seniority of the role), and as requiring experience or traits *that they have* (emphasising their own status). This also has the consequence of presenting the appointment process as rational and meritocratic. By emphasising that the ideal board member (who has the right experience, traits and fit with the board) will be chosen, and the rationality behind this construction, an overall impression is given of a meritocratic process: one where directors are chosen according to objective measures of success (Jackson, 2007; Simpson and Kumra, 2016).

This rational and meritocratic perspective of the appointment process is problematic. First, as other researchers have argued, because meritocracy is a social construct (Simpson *et al.*, 2010), which also has a tendency to obfuscate gender difference (Castilla and Benard, 2010). In the case of directors and how this discourse is mobilised, it results in biased, subjective, masculine and necessarily restrictive criteria for appointment being rationalised as meritocratic. The backgrounds that are constructed as highly desired by boards (those seen as the 'right' experience) are those which the majority of directors hold (Lowe *et al.*, 2016). This becomes even more problematic when considered alongside the findings of the second chapter, which demonstrate that being recommended or known to the board is a key factor in being appointed. The preference for the right experience also means a preference for candidates *already known to the board*. The right experience discourse therefore acts as a smokescreen, as it uses a meritocratic or rational discourse to explain bias towards certain candidates, and disguising biases that will inevitably occur in an appointment system that relies largely or solely on recommendations. Similarly, the emphasis placed on the right personality and

fitting with the board legitimates a subjective appointment process, similarly placing it within a meritocratic discourse.

Finally, the requirement that candidates align with the discursive construction of the ideal board member can also be regarded as representing and reproducing norms or socially accepted models of elite recruitment. Other research into the recruitment for elite organisations, such as consultancy firms (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006), executive search firms (Faulconbridge *et al*., 2012) and banking and finance industries (Fisher, 2012) has noted that these are primary sites for the construction of elite identities: the individuals chosen tend to be of high ability (and are told this is what is sought), and the nature of the work is ambiguous and intellectually demanding (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). In the case of corporate directors, it could be argued that the emphasis on elite identity markers (the right experience, personality and fit for the boardroom) goes deeper than just presentation of self; it is a way of individuals demonstrating they have the right (elite) identity and way of being, to be deemed suitable for the board. Elite identification therefore has an organisational function: in a day-to-day sense it helps organisations to control their employees, but it also helps them to recruit, and restrict entry to recruitment, under meritocratic discourses. By constructing and maintaining a successful, credible elite identity, the organisation (or a corporate board) can attract, recruit or retain highly qualified expert labour (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006: p.199).

7.2. The right networks

In chapter five, Visibility and Networking Practices on the Route to the Boardroom, I explored aspiring directors' networking practices, and how they navigate the board appointment process to gain visibility with board 'gatekeepers' (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014). These findings support the assertion made in the wider literature on board appointments that aspiring directors see success most commonly (or solely) coming through networking, due to the importance of being known to the board. This manifests in discourses concerning networking practices, where they describe their relationships in highly strategic and instrumental terms, presenting their networking as 'work' or 'labour', with the overall aim of collecting as many connections as possible. The presence of a strategic networking discourse in both men's and women's accounts challenges the notion that women have functionally different networks or networking practices to men, or that they favour affective or 'strong' ties (Granovetter, 1971; Ibarra, 1993); rather, all aspiring directors suggest through their narratives that they seek to connect with as many individuals as they can, with the primary aim of gaining visibility. While the strength of the connection may play a role in their subsequent chances of success, as candidates require individuals to advocate for them or 'sponsor' them into roles (Ibarra *et al.*, 2010), this rarely forms part of their sense-making around networking practices and the overall aim is visibility.

While candidates describe highly strategic networking practices, this is upheld alongside an insistence that networking must be done subtly (in the right way), and that they appear not to be pushing 'too hard', as this will be detrimental to their success. This again highlights the importance of understanding networking as a practice that has to be done in the right way, not as something abstract that is done or finished at the point the connection is made.

This concern to do networking in the 'right' way is mobilised in two ways: first, in candidates' implication that potential contacts need to view their efforts as subtle, and second in how they worked to give the impression to me in the interview that while they are being strategic, they are also,

simultaneously and paradoxically, not 'really' networking hard. This emerged in the interviews particularly when candidates attributed their subtle networking to an individual preference, personality or previous career success, presenting the decision as a choice they have individually made, rather than one which is required in order to be successful. This manifests in the research interview, then, as an almost ironic need to be 'subtle' about being 'subtle' in their networking, which has the effect of acting as a smokescreen or obfuscation of how the process operates. Rather than challenging the need to be subtle, they state that it is a personal preference or decision.

The requirement for subtlety can also be placed in the wider context of elite recruitment, which is frequently categorised by social norms that emphasise the individual being sought out or found by the recruiter or headhunter, rather than putting themselves forward (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2012; Fisher, 2012). In this context, by emphasising their need, choice and/or ability to be subtle in their networking practices, candidates emphasise their elite status; again this can be viewed as impression management, which results in the justification of the system operating as it is; in this case, it gives the impression that there is nothing inherently problematic with the need to be found: it is just a process that candidates have to work around. This highlights, as van den Brink and Benschop (2013) argue, the importance of conducting research that examines individuals' networking practices and how they describe them, rather than just examining outcomes.

From a gendered perspective, men's and women's accounts of their networking practices are remarkably similar: both emphasise the need to be both strategic and subtle, and both see networking as a way to strategically gain visibility. Their accounts are gendered, and we see the most significant difference between men and women when we examine the discourses they draw on to make sense of these practices, and how they navigate the need to be highly strategic in their networking while also remaining subtle. While men often described not wanting to push too hard with an insistence that it was best for them or best for gaining success, women more commonly sought to avoid appearing too 'desperate' or 'pushy', and draw on highly gendered and feminised language. Their descriptions of

strategic networking also more commonly drew on a highly neoliberal, self-responsibility discourse, where they are required to be constantly (net)working, in order to be successful. This was particularly the case in later interviews when the requirement to continuously *work* at being visible was seen as a crucial part of their networking. Often this would be attributed to headhunters or Chairs having 'front of mind' bias, where they would only remember or put forward individuals they had seen recently, requiring candidates to (subtly) keep visible. This also highlights the importance and value in conducting longitudinal research, as while in the early interviews all candidates drew on a strategic networking discourse to gain visibility, the process of maintaining visibility was more complex, and made subtlety more difficult to uphold. Often discussions in the literature of networks, networking and visibility can be treated as static states (an individual is either visible or not), rather than treating visibility (and networking) as a constant doing or practice (van den Brink and Benschop, 2013).

This chapter also highlighted the importance of sponsorship: candidates emphasise the need to be recommended by others, put forward by a headhunter, or recommended by another director to a headhunter, appointing board or Chair. While the wider literature on networks and progression has highlighted the importance of (particularly women) having sponsors in the workplace, and their role in comparison to mentors (Ibarra *et al.,* 2010), in the case of directors this can be theorised as a form of co-sponsorship or peer-sponsorship. In this case, we see individuals who are at similar or indiscernible levels of seniority putting each other forward for roles, rather than a necessarily hierarchical relationship, where a more senior sponsor puts forward or advocates for a less senior individual for a role (*ibid.*). This indicates a potential area for further study, as it suggests a need to broaden our understanding of how sponsorship may operate at very senior levels of organisations and in elite networks. While being a sponsor necessitates the individual holding a position of relative power that s/he is able to leverage, in director networks the notion of 'power' is bound up in having access to current board members or gatekeepers, which does not necessarily align with traditional hierarchies. In this area, individuals can sponsor each other, as they may have access to differing networks and boards.

The importance of having sponsors and being recommended for roles was present across candidates' accounts; however, women draw on this more commonly than men, particularly in their insistence on the need to form (informal) networks with other women, and put each other forward for roles. This was often advocated alongside a need to tackle the historical Old Boys' networks; it is taken for granted in women's accounts that they face this barrier due to women's networks being in their relative infancy, and therefore have to form strategies to tackle it. As theorists of neoliberal feminism have noted, this can be regarded as evidence for the taken-for-granted nature of women's disadvantage, alongside a 'lean in' rhetoric, where women, having accepted they face a barrier, insist that they must work hard to overcome it. Most significantly in relation to neoliberal feminist discourses is the absence (Gill, 2002) of any challenge to this: women are not mobilising together in order to challenge the status quo. Rather, their solution is to play the men 'at their own game' (Rottenberg, 2014) and accept the 'work' as their responsibility to engender their own success by surmounting barriers.

The role of men is also notably absent from these discourses. The solution women discuss to tackling men's advantage is to engage in heterophily when individually targeting gatekeepers (who are most commonly men), and to network with other women. However, this is contradicted when discussing formal networks; this comes alongside a contradictory and problematic rejection of women's networks, which are constructed as being a waste of time because of their focus on 'talk' rather than action (Bierema, 2006), and the absence of men in these networks. By comparison, men rarely discussed using formal networks: those men that had been involved in formal NED training provided by the Financial Times (the problematically named 'FT NED *Club*') did not list this as part of their networking strategy; it was not seen as a way to gain visibility. On the few occasions where women discussed networks that are not focused on women (such as those relating to lawyers on boards), they were described as useless because they were populated only by men. Taken together, these contradictions in the discourses around formal networking suggest that the presence of formal

NED networks may have the effect of ghettoising and reaffirming gender segregation, and create highly gendered spaces that are generally not regarded as supporting individuals' chances of success. It may also suggest that in areas where there is emphasis on informal, one-to-one networking, formal networks have little capacity to tackle gender bias.

7.3. Gendered sense-making

In the third chapter, 'Lean in or Sit back? Gendered discourse on the route to the boardroom', I outline the wider social discourses that candidates use to make sense of the process overall, and how they explain their success and failure. This highlights the existence of two contrasting discourses for making sense of the process overall, and reveals how men's and women's adoption of these sense-making discourses is gendered. Women's accounts of their success and failure draw on a 'lean in' discourse; they attribute their success to their ability to lean in and push for roles, particularly through networking. This is often in contradiction to their previous insistence that they must not 'too pushy' in their networking, as their subsequent success affords them the ability to retrospectively make sense of networking as work that was necessary in order to get roles. When accounting for their failure to get a board role in the research period, they draw on similarly neoliberal discourses through internalising reasons for their failure, attributing it to not networking hard enough. By doing so, the only solution they provide for themselves is to network harder and push for roles (while all the while ensuring they are not being *too* pushy).

In contrast to women's sense-making, men's accounts drew on a 'sitting back' discourse. In retrospectively accounting for their success in gaining roles, they emphasised the informal nature of the process, the relatively little 'work' they had to do to be chosen, and how they were approached for roles by headhunters or Chairs. This sense-making also drew on similar markers of elite status and the requirement that subtlety will lead to success. In this discourses the norms of elite recruitment are enacted, and this is further seen in how they emphasised markers of their elite status, the elite spaces these interactions occurred within, and the highly informal nature of the process. When discussing their failure to be appointed over the research period, men also relate it to their decision to 'sit back', attributing it to a personal decision to be choosy when selecting a board role (again emphasising their elite status and ability to be choosy), or to a perception that it is easier for women, because of the women on boards agenda, and their need to therefore be patient and wait for roles to come to them. These failure sense-making discourses therefore externalise failure in their insistence

that it is due to factors out of their control, or internalise it only so much that it is attributed to their decision, (not their inability) to network well, or not being suitable for board roles.

The combination and contradiction between the lean in/sit back discourses, and the strategic/subtle networking seen in the earlier chapter, also represents a wider paradox or double bind occurring in the case of women on boards, where we see women adopting the active and deliberate work advocated by the *Lean In* rhetoric, and applying it to director appointments. The norms of recruitment and identity work that we see emerging in this their accounts and how they reference markers of elite status (for instance, the insistence that individuals must be subtle, patient and wait to be found) challenges ideas of leaning in that advocate women being confident and tackling internal barriers, to push forward for their success. Criticisms of *Lean In* (Foster, 2016; Rottenberg, 2014) or 'confidence cult(ure)' (Gill and Orgad, 2015) have drawn attention to its privileged perspective; the lean in rhetoric is a particular kind of feminism that is only available to a particular kind of woman and role, due to its tendency to fail to account for structural barriers women may face; as Foster neatly sums up: 'if one percent are leaning in, what are the 99% supposed to do?' (Foster, 2016: p. i). However, this research raises another criticism: that leaning in can also be incongruent with success even within the elite or privileged positions. The lean in rhetoric may therefore be detrimental to women's progression; not because these women are not senior enough, held back by structural issues (cf Gill and Orghad, 2016) or because they are holding themselves back with internal self-barriers (Sandberg, 2013), but because the norms of appointments at board level in the UK are based (still) on norms of gentlemanly capitalism (Augar, 2001), where success comes from 'sitting back' and being found, rather than being pushy. Given that the common examples of this rhetoric are almost exclusively American (see Gill and Orghad, 2016), they may also be part of a very specific kind of American success narrative, which is at odds with how British business elites operate.

Another discourse that candidates frequently used to make sense of the process was the assertion that it is easier for women, or in the words of one candidate, there has 'never been a better

time to be a woman'. In women's accounts this discourse emerged as an implicit or explicit statement that it was easier than *it had ever been* for women to get roles, and formed part of their motivation for seeking roles. This discourse most frequently emerged in men's sense-making, however, with an insistence that it is easier for women *than men* to get roles, and that if they had been women they would have found it easier.

This discourse and how it was used by men to account for their failure (even men who had been successful asserted the same belief) is notable for a number of reasons. First, although discursive research is not explicitly focused on uncovering 'truth', the assertion that it is easier for women is not evidenced in the quantitative research literature; over the course of the research period, only thirty per cent of new FTSE 350 board roles went to women (Sealy *et al.*, 2016); before the Davies review it was around ten per cent. This indicates that the bias towards women is overstated; at the least, it suggests that when men are unsuccessful, they are in competition with other men far more commonly than with women. Despite this, no men in the research discussed other men's success as contributing to their failure, and again the absence of discourse is as notable as its presence. Men primarily attribute failure to the presumed increase in women seeking roles, suggesting that the women on boards agenda provides a narrative within which men can make sense of failure, without challenging the notion that they will be successful. Again it is notable that while women drew on the women on boards target as motivation for seeking roles, they rarely used it to make sense of failure: no woman thought that the problem was an overrepresentation of other women (or men) seeking roles.

The strength of the easier for women discourse is also notable because when it forms part of individuals' sense-making, it is related solely to the Davies report and board gender diversity targets, rather than a preference for women because they are more desirable candidates, better for business, or necessary as a way to address social injustice. Both the business case and the social justice case for women on boards (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015) are absent, and the advantage for women is solely attributed to the need to meet the target. The way this is mobilised in the research interviews could

therefore be interpreted as a backlash against the target where women are regarded as 'tokens' that are there solely to fulfil a quota (Shilton *et al.*, 2010), men feel they are at a disadvantage due to 'positive discrimination', and the quality of boards is presumed to decrease (Ahern and Dittmar, 2012; Shilton *et al.*, 2010). This is interesting also because it suggests that the Davies' review had similar effects and backlash often attributed to quotas. Indeed, the UK has had more success with a voluntary target than many other countries had with quotas (see for example Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). While the business-focused, target approach was likely useful for gaining traction in the UK business audiences (Sealy *et al.*, 2017), the business case was not ultimately part of candidates' narratives. While individuated justice or meritocratic discourses were evident – a belief that women are an untapped pool of qualified talent – the belief that women and diversity are valuable addition to boards was notably absent. This finding chimes with Seierstad's (2016) assertion that in cases where quotas or targets are utilised, it is important to examine their effects beyond just an increase in diversity.

The strength of this discourse may also be evidence of the research interview being used as an accomplishment (Alvesson, 2003) for the interviewees: they saw it as an opportunity to challenge the women on boards initiative. Given that academics were (seen as) key actors in the women on boards agenda in the UK (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015), and that my research was connected with a headhunter known for being committed to women on boards, interviewees may have aligned me with the overall women on boards initative. This could allow them to take the interview as an opportunity to challenge the assertion that women face a barrier, and state instead that men now face a disadvantage. As has also been found in much gender research (Kelan, 2015; Gill, 2008; Scharff, 2010) men often expressed criticisms of gender equality agendas as 'disclaimers' (Gill, 2000; Hewitt and Stokes, 1975). In this context, they are positive about the need to get women on boards; they are well versed on the subject of diversity (cf. Kelan, 2015) and insist that the change is positive, while also being highly critical or presenting sexist accounts.

Such occurrences present a dilemma for feminist research (one that I felt during the interviews and analysis) as to how much power and/or obligation researchers have to challenge opinions we disagree with or perceive as problematic or sexist. There is a concern that by offering interviewees a space to express their views (views they acknowledge as being unacceptable or distasteful to voice) we give them legitimacy. This was also complicated by the research design: conducting longitudinal research, representing a head-hunting firm who acted as a gatekeeper,[28] negotiating power imbalances between myself and the interviewees, and a concern with interviewee retention, made it inappropriate, or made me feel unable to challenge views I disagreed with or saw as factually inaccurate.

This also suggests a need to reflect on the nature of the research interview as contributing to this discourse and engendering a co-production of this narrative, if by my decision not to challenge the discourse I encouraged its production; treating the interview as a conversation and co-production of data, rather a neutral medium for its collection. This also relates to debates around the disjuncture between gender-neutral interviews and a gendered analysis, and an ethical or moral argument that when feminist values come undeclared in analysis, this amounts to the research process not being fully open or transparent (Watts, 2006). Hammersley (2013) argues that this is particularly an issue when conducting discourse analysis: by failing to be fully open about their intentions with the data, researchers do not gain informed consent from their participants. In this case, emphasising the gender-neutrality of the research, asking gender-neutral questions, not challenging their assertions that the process is gender neutral or biased towards women, and then analysing responses through a gendered lens to argue that the process is gendered, could, arguably amount to deceit (Hammersley, 2013). While I align with Taylor's response to Hammersley that informing interviewees how the data will be analysed is impractical and 'denies the specialist nature of academic research' (Taylor, 2013: p. 543), by not challenging men's assertion that it is easier for women, I may have emphasised my role

[28] And who had expressed concern at my ability to be professional at the outset of the research.

as a sympathetic researcher, and away from a feminist standpoint, further disguising the feminist perspective of the research,[29] and contributing to the strength of this discourse in the interviews.

[29] This was further evidenced when, on presenting the research report 'Opening the Black Box: Women's and Men's Routes to the Boardroom', at an event in March 2015, an early presentation of the research findings, one of the male interviewees approached me after the presentation to state that he was unhappy with the focus the research had taken on women's experience, and reiterated again that it was more difficult for men, due to the focus on women.

7.4. Women on boards as a gendered elite

When examining the board appointment process through the experiences of aspiring directors, these research findings can also be placed within a wider social context, and located within three key areas of research. First, our understandings of the corporate elite and how they reproduce themselves, second, our understandings of how women's experiences of being in the elite are gendered and third, how the women on boards agenda has affected board appointments.

7.4.1. The wealth elite

Corporate directors in the FTSE 350 can be understood as members of the corporate 'wealth elite' or 'professional executive class' (Bennet *et al.*, 2009; Savage *et al.*, 2013) recently outlined by Savage and colleagues, who point to the existence of a new kind of elite class, culturally different from historical power elites, and as occupying a unique space in class and society (*ibid*.). This research therefore responds to Savage and colleagues' (2013) assertion that this elite requires further investigative study, to explore this elite's existence beyond demographic categorisation, and to use class as a way to 'strategically open up issues of concern' (Savage, 2015: p. 224). As is also the case with the women on boards literature, the recent (re)focus being made onto the corporate elite through identifying their existence therefore encourages a need for greater qualitative study. Through examining the board appointment process from the perspective of aspiring directors, we can see how members of this class make sense of their existence, while also seeing how the appointment process is legitimised by and within candidates' sense-making.

When we examine the process overall, there is a tendency for aspiring directors – and later, those who are appointed – to both explicitly and implicitly advocate the process operating as it does. In some cases this emerges implicitly: very few candidates actively criticised the appointment process and how it operates. Candidates' accounts contain numerous examples of how they have learned how to 'play the game', through focusing on strategic and subtle networking, understanding how search practice operates and how they can use it to their advantage, or through emphasising how their

experience translates into the 'right' experience or working to demonstrate how they 'fit' with the board. Where we do see criticism of the system, it is frequently couched in highly individualistic terms, rather than advocating broader changes.

In some cases, the justification for the board appointment process operating as it does emerges more explicitly, where candidates state that it is necessary for the appointment process to operate as it does, because of the importance of businesses being able to trust their directors. The recruitment process involving recommendations and connections with other individuals already in the space allows boards to ensure the people they appoint are trustworthy, relating to the norms of gentlemanly capitalism (Auguar, 2001) that are often treated as a historic aspect of business but appear here in individuals' discourses. The justification of the Old Boys' network appointment process on the grounds that boards need to be able to trust directors (as discussed in chapter 6) also necessarily qualifies directors based on the 'experimental judgment of other people' (Nicholas, third interview); however, it is notable that the people this refers to are those who are already in the board space. Similarly the meritocratic discourses discussed in chapter 4 suggest how the process is justified, as it frequently saw directors describing a need to fit the board. The ability to 'fit' is discursively connected to their ability to be a good director, where the board is conceptualised as a unit, and 'fit' is a necessary part of their role.

Criticism of the appointment process is also restricted by candidates' tendency to draw on individualised discourses when discussing how they navigate it. In the case of networking, it was taken for granted that networking is the only route to get roles, but had to be done subtly. This was often described in highly individualised terms where candidates would assert that this method was best for them. They network subtly because they feel uncomfortable being pushy, for instance, or they have achieved success so far by having 'never been a planner', and using this as a justification for their current networking practices. Similarly, when retrospectively accounting for success, this would be attributed to personal decisions and actions – having networked in the right way or with the

right people, for instance, or having the right experience. When accounting for failure, this would be aligned with not having networked enough (women), or being choosy and patient (men). In all cases, this underlying discourse of self-responsibility and individualism reaffirms the notion that they have to work hard to overcome the system as it stands, rather than challenging the status quo. This is also seen in the meritocratic discursive effects of the ideal board member discourse: emphasis on the right experience and traits supports a notion that the process is rational, meritocratic and rigorous.

Overall, these findings suggest that while this new financial elite are characterised by a presumed opening up of their recruitment processes (McDowell, 1998), particularly with the increased appointment of women and people outside the traditional Old Boys' networks, the way that directors are appointed is remarkably resilient to change. It suggests a space within which new cultural norms are re-enacted, and offers insight into how these cultural norms and discourses are upheld within this wealth elite. The findings from this research suggest that corporate directors may be theorised as sitting at an intersection between being part of the 'new' capitalism, and a bastion of gentlemanly capitalism. It is new in the sense that it is ambiguous and non-hierarchical; unlike executive director roles, non-executive directors do not sit at the top of a clear hierarchy with clear steps for progression. Instead, candidates gain roles by taking 'ambiguously lateral moves' (Sennett, 1998: p. 85), which they discursively cast as moving up rather than laterally. On the other hand, the very existence of corporate boards of directors is historic, and harks back to gentlemanly capitalism norms that are made up of a focus on trust between individuals, which are seen embedded within the appointment process. This allows the discourses that surround this particular world to be made up of both cultures: the process of appointment is simultaneously highly rational (they need very specific kinds of people who are appointed rigorously and meritocratically) and highly irrational and informal (they need people they like and trust).

7.4.2. Gender and Elites

This research also seeks to contribute to the call for more research into women in elite roles (Mavin and Grandy, 2014; 2016a; 2016b), and to locate the women on boards agenda as relating to the increased presence of women in the corporate elite. The research therefore provides a case study of a particular subsection of a population, an organisation (theoretically, rather than geographically) that has in recent years seen a rapid increase in the number of women, and it therefore offers insight into this particular elite of women, their experiences, and how they make sense of their position. Building on Savage and colleagues' assertion that class can be used to strategically open up areas of concern, I argue that in the case of women on boards, gender must also be used as a way to strategically open up areas of concern, to move beyond body counting and understand how their experiences can illuminate the corporate elite.

Women seeking board roles occupy a unique space that offers new avenues for theorisation, as the board appointment process can be regarded as a site within which to examine how their privilege is conferred, contested and defended (Mavin and Grandy, 2016). Women in this position hold power and have made it through the 'glass ceiling'; however, they are also marginalised (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a). Studying their experiences of seeking to move (or moving) from one privileged space to another, as is the case when seeking a new role, can offer an understanding of how gender is embedded in these spaces, how women negotiate their privilege and disadvantage, and what discourses are navigated and upheld in the process.

Because they are simultaneously privileged and abject, women in this corporate elite have to work, both literally and discursively, to hold on to that privilege, in a way that is seen much less significantly in men's accounts. Similar accounts are found in ethnographic work into women who occupy minority spaces in highly masculinised spaces, such as in banking and finance industries (Fisher, 2012; McDowell, 1997), where they have to work to establish credibility and legitimacy. This also contributes to their discourses around meritocracy; their insistence that they have or will achieve

success through their hard work and own ability is part of the discursive work they have to do in order to uphold the notion that they were or will be appointed meritocratically (Sealy, 2010; Kelan, 2010). This may also contribute to the difference in discourses used by men and women in how they make sense of networking and the process overall; women's starkly neoliberal discourses that emphasised the work they put in were mobilised to argue that they achieved success through hard work, rather than nepotism or bias towards women due to the quota. In comparison, men's discourses that emphasised the relatively little work they put into networking and the informality of the process are not available to women, as this would challenge the notion of meritocracy that their privilege is based on. This places women in a double-bind: when they are not successful in gaining roles, they insist that they have to work harder; and when they are successful they have to subscribe to the process operating as it does, because it is the system that led to their success.

While women in senior roles still remain in a relative minority, the (rapid) increase in the number of women on boards also provides an opportunity to examine how their experiences are influenced by gender; how they do gender well and differently; and how women's relationships and interactions with each other are played out in the board appointment process.

One notable gendered discourse that emerges throughout the research relates to Mavin and Grandy's (2016a; 2016b) work on respectable business femininity: 'a discursive and relational process that explains the tensions women elite leaders can experience at the nexus of being sometimes privileged, embedded notions of embodied leadership as masculine, and wider expectations of acceptable embodied femininity' (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b: p. 380). As in Mavin and Grandy's work, women seeking roles have these tensions manifest in the way they discuss a need to discipline their bodies and bring them into line with respectable business femininity, such as through not having pink nails, straightening curly hair or wearing appropriate clothing, so as not to be rejected by a business-conservative boardroom. These findings support the notion that women may be excluded from the boardroom for their femininity not 'fitting' a masculine model of success, or at least that

women note this incompatibility and work around the expectations. This finding was also particularly notable due to its similarity with the process of aesthetic labour I went through in preparing for the interviews (Brown, 2016; Masciave, 2015), downplaying femininity to be seen as credible and respectable as leaders, and as women (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b: p. 382).

Femininity was also treated negatively throughout in the repetition of negative connotations attached to it. Women in this study frequently used exaggerated feminine terms to refer to negative aspects of the process: women who network too hard are 'shameless' or prostitutes; self-limiting doubts are described as 'female doubts'; they are concerned with being too 'desperate' or 'pushy'; women's networks are 'handbag clubs', et cetera. This can be seen as a form of negative intra-gender relation (Mavin and Grandy, 2012) through its negative description of other women in the space, but it also operates as a way for women to distance themselves from other women, particularly those who they do not see as being as successful or as likely to succeed as they are. This kind of queen bee syndrome (*ibid*.) or tendency to be negative about other women becomes even more significant in the board space, because the hierarchies are so difficult to navigate, and there are no clear paths to progression. This also results in a contradictory discourse wherein women emphasise the importance of their working with other women to be successful, particularly in the oft-repeated assertion that there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women. We see throughout their accounts then a kind of gendered elite sense-making; in the process of criticising other women, they are emphasising their elite status, and using gendered language to do so.

As noted above in relation to women's sense-making, there is also an incompatibility between the model of success often advocated by the *Lean In* rhetoric, and the norms of what is acceptable in the elite's appointment process. As well as being problematic due to it not necessarily leading to success, the strength of the neoliberal feminism discourses also results in the process being justified; by emphasising how their hard work led to success, women maintain the perspective that they worked hard to get the roles, even while success is connected to being known by and to the right people. This

is also seen in the way that they discursively draw parallels between their experiences of seeking board roles and other areas of recruitment; this normalises the appointment process, and thus obfuscates some of the barriers that are specifically related to elite recruitment, namely the lack of public advertisement for board roles and the reliance on executive search firms and on networking. They also have to work harder to uphold their privilege in this contested position (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) given the strength of the easier for women discourse. This backlash, with the underlying message that women who do not 'deserve' roles may be appointed, may require women to work even harder to discursively emphasise meritocracy, even within a biased appointment process.

7.5. Key contributions and future research

The findings from this research have a number of key contributions, methodologically and theoretically. These are outlined throughout this chapter, and highlighted key themes here as they relate to potential areas for future research.

First, this research contributes to the extant research on women on boards. The data presented has highlighted key aspects of what is deemed to constitute an ideal board member, showing that that candidates' conception of the ideal board member is restrictive, gendered, and narrows entry through a reliance on having the right experience, the right personality and fit with the board. This draws on and develops the debates in the literature around the human capital of directors, showing how directors adopt human capital explanations in their sensemaking. Future research could develop this further by examine how this ideal is conceptualised by those that sit on boards, to understand if it is a repertoire adopted during the appointment process or if it also part of being a director, and if the conception is similar for those who have been successful. Westphal (2010) has highlighted this job role 'impression management' occurring in existing directors in the United States, but it would develop our understanding further to examine this in the UK context, and particularly in relation to the effect of the women on boards target.

The same research development could be applied to the concept of 'fit'. This research offers empirical support for a reliance on fit as part of the appointment process, something that has been oft-cited in criticisms of the board appointment process (see for example Doldor *et al.*, 2010), but that is less often empirically demonstrated, or sufficiently operationalised. It is also, problematically, often assumed to be necessary for an effective board: this study and others (Pye, 2001; 2004) have shown that it is regarded as an important part of a director's role and therefore not incongruous with notions of merit. Given its persistence and the impossibility in defining or measuring it, future research in this area could examine if and how 'fit' occurs within the boardroom setting, and how directors' interactional norms are defined within boardroom conversations. This would provide empirical

evidence for or against the existence of 'fit', and thereby challenge or confirm its importance in recruitment practices. This is an area where adopting discursive or conversation analysis of boardroom conversations for example could add significant value, to better understand how fit is enacted and embodied by directors.

This study also contributes to the women on boards debates and corporate governance literature, by offering an understanding of how the board appointment process operates. While the reliance on networks has been identified in other research too, this study also supports the social capital explanation for a lack of women on boards, but places it in a wider context. It demonstrates the implications of this network-based recruitment in elites, that it required individuals to be both strategic and subtle in their networking practices. This research contributes to wider theoretical work on networks and networking, through demonstrating the importance of taking a networking practices approach rather than a networks approach (van den Brink and Benschop, 2009), as it reveals the work that goes in to establishing and maintaining networks, and how this work is gendered. The notion of subtle networking has not been identified in other literatures, and is worthy of further examination.

This research also responds to calls in the literature for research into women in senior elite roles (Mavin and Grandy, 2014) and in doing so contributes both to the literature on gender and organisations, and gender and elites. Recruitment for a specific, high status role offers insight into barriers these women face even having 'made it' through the glass ceiling, and the work they undertake to negotiate privilege and disadvantage (Sealy, 2010), and thus offers site for theory development in relation to gender and organisations. It has shown areas where they face similar challenges to those women lower down in organisations – such as needing to ensure their appearance is in line with business femininity – but it also illuminates what is unique to their privileged position, and is specific to their seeking new roles within UK boardrooms. While women articulated having to balance a masculine model of success while ensuring they are feminine, polished and groomed, these notions of success relate to both gender and class: being 'polished' is a display of femininity more

available to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Brown, 2016; Witz et al., 2003; Freidman, 2017, personal communication), and is attributed to the 'conservative' nature of boardrooms. This research sought to contribute to our understanding of how women negotiate their position in and out of privilege and disadvantage, and in doing so supports Mavin and Grandy's assertion that women in these roles must do 'gender well and differently' (Mavin and Grandy, 2012) in order to uphold credibility. More broadly, it demonstrates the importance of moving beyonf a 'body counting' starting point to gender equality, by highlighting the gendered differences and practices at work in the appointment process, even while numerically the number of women has vastly increased.

This research also demonstrates the existence of a double bind in women's accounts as they draw on wider discourses relating to corporate or neoliberal feminism – advocating that they 'lean in' – while navigating (British) elite recruitment norms that they state require them not to push 'too hard'. Given the American-centric nature of the Lean In movement and its critics – Sheryl Sandberg, Marie-Ann Slaughter, Catherine Rottenberg and Nancy Fraser are all American – this suggests more work can be done in the UK context to establish, empirically, the longer-term effects of corporate feminist discourses in UK women. While critiques of the lean in movement are both theoretical (Rottenberg, 2014) and practical and radical (Foster, 2016) there has not been any sustained critique of its American-centrism by placing it in the context of British class society and the history of elites. This challenges a one-size fits all model of women's success, and also demonstrating the value of an intersectional approach, and further research.

Finally, the research also contributes to knowledge around the existence and reproduction of a corporate elite. Throughout the research, candidates accounts were imbued with elite discourses, references to indicators of elite status and descriptions of elite networking and recruitment practices. Paradoxically in some cases, they were also imbued with discourses of meritocracy. As in Seierstad's (2016) research into women who were appointed after the quota was brought in in Norway, issues of merit and gender are implicated in individuals' arguments and accounts, and often in contradictory

ways. In this research, we see how meritocracy is fundamental to notions of what makes the ideal board member, and can therefore act as a smokescreen for bias: it is argued that those with the right experience will be appointed, while having the 'right' experience also means being in the same networks as current directors. Understanding directors as members of a corporate elite makes this emphasis on meritocratic discourses theoretically interesting, as meritocracy may be a way that they justify their location within elites, particularly when it is discursively combined with references to their elite status. This also suggests that those involved in the process either explicitly or implicitly justify the process operating as it does. Either this occurs on meritocratic terms through advocating the importance of getting people who can be trusted, or on individualised terms where discourses of self-responsibility and self-blame are used to explain outcomes of the process. This may suggest that meritocracy is part of the 'culture of being' (Savage *et al.*, 2015) that this elite operate by; contributing to our understanding of elites, and suggesting an area for further research.

In addition to theoretical contributions, this research also contributes to the methodological literature. It offers an example of how a longitudinal discourse analysis could be adopted, and highlights the value of a narrative-discursive method (Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Taylor, 2015). Many of the key findings of this project came through analysis of different kinds of discursive resources: examining interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), wider discourses, and individual, local resources (Taylor, 2006) and particularly reflecting on the temporal and repeated nature of interviewees' talk. The repetition of individuals' responses across interviews several months apart can therefore be theorised as part of the process of sensemaking and identity formation, rather than of evidence of 'truths', as may be the case in research which treats talk as evidence for external or internal phenomenon. This proved particularly important in this research given the persistence of discourses that are 'untrue', such as it being is 'easier for women' or the insistence that only certain people will be successful. A discursive perspective also allows for examination of the effects of these repertoires, and how they shape social contexts, which has implications for policy, as discussed below.

A methodological challenge raised by this research comes if we regard the research interview as a potential area of 'accomplishment' (Alvesson, 2003) that offered interviewees an opportunity to challenge the women on boards initiative. While Sealy and colleagues (Sealy *et al.*, 2017) discuss at length the advantages of their having been 'neutral' academic researchers that were not overtly critical and therefore contributed to change, the success of the women on boards initiative (and the academics who became well-known and connected to this success) may have impacted this study's outcomes and findings. My appearance as a 'women on boards researcher' meant I could be easily categorised alongside the same body of work, particularly given the connection with a search firm known for their commitment to appointing women, and this may have influenced (male) interviewees' tendency to insist that it is easier for women. At the same time, having a connection with a search firm and doing research in this area will have contributed to my ability to do the research at all. It may be then, that when studying areas with the overall aim of making change (particularly in organisational or corporate settings), research that is perceived as neutral or non-challenging can be used to pave the way for more critical work. This is particularly pertinent for diversity research, which regularly faces the challenge of being taken seriously in order to effect change in organisations (Noon, 2012).

7.6. The effect of the Davies Report – There's never been a better time to be a woman?

Finally, it is important to place this research within the social context, and the influence of the women on boards agenda in the UK, in order to understand the policy implications of the research Having started the Davies review in 2011, the final women on boards (under Lord Davies' review[30]) event was held in August 2015. The tone was jubilant and congratulatory; the target set by Lord Davies in 2011 of 25 per cent women on boards of FTSE 100 companies had been met, and the campaign that he started regarded as an overwhelming success (Sealy *et al.*, 2017). The final report (Davies, 2015) contained a number of highly positive quotes, praising Lord Davies and the campaign for their immense achievement. From a body-counting perspective the Davies review was an immense accomplishment; however, there has, throughout the process and time period, been very little (space for) critical feminist engagement with the women on boards phenomena. This research has attempted to start this critical engagement, by highlighting the problems and potential backlash with the unquestioned narrative of progress. This research, like Seierstad (2016) highlights the importance of examining how men and women are affected by the existence of a target or quota, beyond just the numerical increase of women on boards.

As the academics who worked on this initiative acknowledge themselves, the success of the target depended on gaining broad support from businesses, and different political parties and governments, and it therefore needed to have broad political appeal (Sealy *et al.*, 2017). They argue that this resulted in the initiative having to avoid adopting radical, social justice arguments, and instead draw on business logics, so as to avoid alienating corporate audiences. Although this is understandable in relation to engendering social change, the lack of critical feminist or radical analyses may contribute to a progress narrative being adopted without assessment of the wider

[30] While the Female FTSE reports have been continued by the Cranfield School of Management (see Sealy *et al.*, 2016), the agenda is no longer spearheaded by Lord Davies, and 2015 marked the end of his leadership of the process. The most recent women on boards publication in August 2016 set a target of thirty per cent by 2020, and emphasised the need to focus on the executive pipeline and on the FTSE 250, which has increased the number of women far more slowly.

implications beyond an increase of women. This critical analysis is important, first because, despite the 'problem' of a lack of women on boards being associated with an opaque system, the increased number of women is not necessarily indicative of change in the process itself. Second, there is evidence of a backlash, in the now taken-for-granted assumption that there has never been a better time to be a woman, and that men now face a disadvantage.

One of the problems with the way that the women on boards agenda has occurred in the UK is that it has taken a body counting, gender and organisation perspective (Calas *et al.*, 2014): the problem of 'lack of women' was identified, a target of 25 per cent women on boards was set, with a deadline, and the target was met. Particularly given that the speed with which the target was achieved, having been set in 2011 and was then reached in 2015, suggests that the Davies report and focus on getting women on to boards has operated as a discursive or 'soft' quota: while there was no threat of legal action, the outcomes (both positive and negative) were the same. Positive developments in the increased number of women has also elicited negative responses in the form of a backlash.

The way that this discourse is mobilised by candidates emphasises how the women on boards initiative may be seen, even by those going through it, as occurring in a narrow and specific time period. For women, the easier for women discourse underpins their description that they need to 'use this window' of opportunity, to seek roles at a time when boards are required (as per the target) to address gender diversity. For men, it emerges as a need for them to bide their time or be patient (i.e. wait for this window to close) at which point it is assumed they will be more likely to be successful. Given that these discourse are tied to a short-term view of the target and agenda, rather than discussed as a sea change, challenges or queries the notion that the rapid increase is indicative of long-lasting change. Similarly, women's use of the easier for women discourse, alongside a reluctance or inability to challenge the process, and reliance on meritocratic discourses, makes the process further impervious to critique. Because there has 'never been a better time to be a woman', they cannot challenge the process that has led to their success.

The fact that those who are currently seeking roles (or have succeeded in being appointed) describe this as a window or phase in history, suggests, even more problematically, that there is little evidence of long-term change in attitudes towards gender diversity or a broader range of candidates being appointed. It is problematic that even women who have been successful do not describe the focus on women directors as anything other than relating to the target, or as a short-term change. Given that at the time of writing the proportion of women on boards has plateaued (August 20l6 is the first time since 2011 the number of women on boards has not increased), these findings suggest that change may have been short-term.

While this research highlights the lack of a social justice case for women on boards in individuals' accounts (as Seierstad and colleagues (2016) have commented in relation to the UK too), it also questions the success of the business case. The business case for women on boards, which was such a part of the public discussion in the UK, is notably and surprisingly absent; instead, there is an active and perceptible focus on appointing women as a way to meet the Davies target. The business case is also not embedded in individuals' accounts, and is not a discursive repertoire available to aspiring directors; women seeking boards roles are not describing accounts of pushing themselves forward for roles on account of their gender. When they do account for their success on the basis of being a woman, it is often done apologetically, as it goes against discourses of meritocracy that they are more insistent on maintaining. While the business case might be useful for persuading boards that they should be choosing women (and it is beyond the scope of this research to assess the level to which this occurs), it is not useful for individuals as they are going through the process, due to its incompatibility with meritocracy, and the norms of elite reproduction. This has policy implications, as it suggests the value of using a business case to advocate for gender equality may be limited in its success if they are not becoming part of the rhetoric around appointing women.

This research aligns with Seierstad and colleagues' assertion that in the UK context, the political action to increase the number of women on boards was largely due to a need to respond to Norway, but will not necessarily result in actors, politicians, businesses and boards (or even directors themselves) buying into the idea that appointing women will be good from either a business or a social justice perspective (Seierstad *et al.*, 2016: p. 36). It also aligns with Doldor and colleagues' (2016) assertion that discussions around diversity need to move beyond a social justice versus business case argument, in order to better understand how organisations, actors and governments may be encouraged to engage in diversity changes for different reasons. The force of the 'voluntary' nature of the Davies review instead made it business *critical* that organisations engage; search firms as a way to respond to a growth in the market, and boards to protect their reputation from being 'named and shamed' (Davies, 2011) . This raises challenges for moving the women on boards agenda forward however, if the success is related to reluctance rather than commitment to change.

As I noted earlier in the thesis, one of the reasons for the lack of qualitative research in this area is the difficulty of getting access to aspiring directors, and elites more generally. Partly as a result of this, the majority of academic work in this area in the UK has been dominated by a relatively small number of academics, who are within or connected to the corporate world. This is not in itself problematic, and indeed they have been instrumental in driving the women on boards agenda (Seierstad et al., 2015); however, as many of them hold roles within the corporate elite and are interconnected, they have been less able (or less inclined) (Sealy *et al.*, 2016) to critique the elite they are examining (cf. Bushell, 2013; Gaughan, 2013; Sealy et al.., 2016; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013; Vinnecombe et al., 2015; Doldor et al., 2012; 2016). Similarly, this bind exists in the wider women on boards agenda, wherein those individuals and organisations who have been involved most heavily (politicians, businesses, boards, Chairs, executive search firms, elite corporations and academics) are largely members of the corporate or wealth elite themselves. The concentration of these same individuals examining the process, afforded them the ability to set the parameters for the problem and the solution, with no specific mandate (or motivation) to change the process itself. (cf. Doldor et al.,

2016). As a demonstration of this, in addition to a number of the candidates being connected to each other (even when they were not recruited through the same channels), five of the thirty candidates described a personal connection with Lord Davies, and three of these noted how being connected with him had been beneficial to their chances of getting a board role. While the outcomes in terms of the number of women gaining roles has been positive, it has maintained power in a small, narrow elite of directors, headhunters and academics, resulting in an unavoidable progress narrative (see Sealy *et al.*, 2017 for an extended example of this progress narrative).

This same issue has been identified in research into search firms, who were in the initial Davies review identified as part of the problem and the solution (Davies, 2011). Doldor and colleagues (2016) argue that headhunters, rather than being tempered radicals – those who disguise their diversity-focused, social justice focused agendas in order to engender change – were 'accidental activists', those who participated in a 'fashionable' debate for its lucrative opportunities, and unwittingly become change actors for diversity. Their research found that search firms themselves justified their supporting the women on boards agenda and appointing more women through referring to the institutional pressures created by the Davies review and the threat of quotas, which also made it a commercial imperitive for them to seek and provide more female candidates for their clients. This research supports this same problem, and demonstrates that the wider perspectives on women on boards are intrinsically connected to the Davies review, drawing on neither a social justice or business case for gender equality. This has potentially disastrous consequences for the future of board diversity, particularly given that Lord Davies is no longer leading the inquiry, and the number of women being appointed has stopped increasing (Sealy *et al.*, 2016).

In her work on the narratives surrounding the financial crisis, Prügl (2015) argues that out of the financial crisis there emerged a 'women as saviours' narrative, with two key gendered characterisations: the 'prudent woman and chastened man', where women were brought in to temper

the greed and testosterone of men in the financial industries, and men emerged chastened. She argues that this acts as an ideological narrative or myth, the progress narrative of which is used to distract and detract from the 'unpalatable' reality of sexism, and give the impression that there has been considerable change. The women on boards rhetoric and its narrative of progress, often one that is presented rather self-indulgently by those who were primarily responsible (see for example . Davies, 2015; Sealy *et al.*, 2017; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2015), tends to emphasise how far we have come in a short space of time, detracting from any potential downsides. It treats the increased representation of women on boards as indicative of change in the system more generally, in a similar way to that observed by Linda McDowell in the financial industries in the 1980s, where the rapid increase in recruitment outside the traditional elite led to a perception that the recruitment process was more meritocratic, democratic, and open to a wider range of people (McDowell, 1998; Leyshon and Thrift, 1997).

This is not to say that there has been no change in how directors are appointed, or that the increased number of women on boards in the UK should be treated entirely problematically. The increased focus on getting women onto boards has engendered a great deal of wider discussion around the role of women in corporate boards, and the most recent reports have emphasised the need to focus on the executive pipeline, which may encourage a reinvigoration of research into gender and organisations and the barriers to women's progression at senior levels. It has also opened up the possibility of their study; indeed, the motivation for this research and its ability to gain both financial and collaborative sponsorship, are in large part due to women on boards being considered an important subject for study, both within academia and business. Other researchers in this area (see Sealy et al., 2017 for instance) have advocated the need to move forward with more radical and critical perspectives on women on boards; having increased the number of women on boards, there is now a need to critically engage with the discourses that have emerged around board diversity and the appointment process. In particular, there is a need to identify how false truths are constructed and reproduced. This thesis, therefore, has sought to build on the current research into women on boards,

through illuminating how aspiring directors navigate the appointment process, placing the topic within wider social discourses, and thus revealing gendered discourses on the route to the boardroom.

Appendices

Appendix I – Sampling frames

1.1. Intended Sampling Frame

Industry Background	Number of Interviewees*
Financials (Retail or Investment Banking, Insurance, Real Estate, other Financial Services)	10
Professional Services (Big Four firms, Accountancy, Law)	4
Industrials (Basic Materials, Basic Resources, Mining, Oil and Gas)	4
Retail (Consumer Goods, Consumer Services)	2
Operations (Any industry, Operations function background e.g. COO)	2
Technology (Telecommunications, Digital)	2
Human Resources (Any industry, HR Director or equivalent)	2
Wildcard (candidates from atypical backgrounds, unusual mix of the above).	4

1.2 Final Sample

Industry Background	Number of Interviewees*
Financials (Retail or Investment Banking, Insurance, Real Estate, other Financial Services)	10
Professional Services (Big Four firms, Accountancy, Law)	8
Industrials (Basic Materials, Basic Resources, Mining, Oil and Gas)	4
Retail (Consumer Goods, Consumer Services)	2
Technology (Telecommunications, Digital)	2
Human Resources (Any industry, HR Director or equivalent)	2
Advertising and Marketing	2

(*candidates were in matched pairs, i.e. 10 = 5 men and 5 women, 4 = two men and two women, *etcetera*.)

Appendix II – Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

REC Reference Number:_____

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Routes to the Board - Gender in the board appointment process

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

There is much public debate around how few directors on corporate boards are women. The research project asks if there are any differences in how men and women seek board appointments. I therefore hope to interview men and women during their search for their first FTSE100 board appointment. The research will trace your experiences of the process, which includes exploring what role your relationships with others play in it, for example a mentor or sponsor.

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to participate in three interviews over an 18-month period. Each of the interviews should last no longer than an hour and will be conducted in a Central London location. Interviews will be audio recorded, subject to your permission. All recordings and transcripts will be held securely, and only the researcher will have access to them. Your name will not be used in any presentation or publication, and your responses will be anonymous throughout.

In addition to the interviews, it might be useful to keep an aide memoire about your experiences in between the interviews, but this is not compulsory.

While I approach you as a potential board candidate of Sapphire Partners, the study is conducted independently from Sapphire Partners. Should you decide not to participate in the study, this will not impact your relationship with Sapphire Partners in any way.

It is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. You can request that recording be stopped at any point, or that any part of the interview be omitted from the study. You may request that particular segments be deleted. Even after the interview(s) are finished, you have the right to cancel your agreement to participate in this study, and to remove your data from inclusion anytime before 1st January 2015 when the material will be written up. After this time the anonymised interview transcripts will be transferred to the Economic and Social Data Service, in line with the Economic and Social Research Council guidelines. You may also request that your responses be left out of this.

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact the researcher on the details below.

Project Researcher:

Scarlett Brown, Department of Management, King's College London,

Telephone: 07870 856 359 Email: scarlett.brown@kcl.ac.uk

Project Supervisor:

Dr. Elisabeth Kelan, Department of Management, King's College London.

Telephone: 020 7848 3288 Email: Elisabeth.kelan@kcl.ac.uk

Research Sponsor:

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Sapphire Partners

Appendix III – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

Title of Study: Getting on Board: Comparing Men and Women's Experience of the Board Appointment process

King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: _____

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Please tick or initial

I understand that if I decide at any time during the research that I no longer wish to participate in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and withdraw from it immediately without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the date of write up (1st January 2015). ☐

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998. ☐

I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications. ☐

I agree that the research team may use my data for future research. I understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee. In such cases, as with this project, data would not be identifiable in any report.

Yes	No

I agree to my data being offered to the Economic and Social Data Service. I understand that in such cases, as with this project, my data would not be identifiable.

Yes	No

I consent to my interview being audio recorded.

Yes	No

Please indicate if you would like a copy of the final report.

Yes	No

Participant's Statement:

I _____

agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet about the project, and understand what the research study involves.

Signed_____ Date_____

Researcher's Statement:

I, Scarlett Brown, confirm that I have carefully explained the nature, demands and foreseeable risks (where applicable) of the proposed research to the volunteer.

Signed_____ Date_____

Appendix IV – Recruitment Letter

Scarlett Brown
PhD Student
Department of Management

Franklin-Wilkins Building
Waterloo Campus
15 Stamford Street
London SE1 9NH

scarlett.brown@kcl.ac.uk

Dear Sir/Madam

We would like to invite you to participate in a doctoral research project that is being conducted at King's College London in collaboration with Sapphire Partners and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project explores men and women's experiences of being appointed to corporate board appointments. While the board appointment process is incredibly important to the UK's business productivity and corporate governance there is surprisingly little robust academic research on the process.

The research will be based on interviews with men and women who considering taking on a non-executive position on the corporate board of a FTSE350 company, or company of similar size. As a senior executive fitting this profile, we are hoping you might be interested in participating in this exciting research project. Participation would involve up to three interviews over an 18-month period. Each of the interviews should last no longer than an hour and will be conducted in a Central London location most convenient to you. The interview will cover areas such as your motivations for considering joining a board, the channels you might use, how you might be targeted by Chairs or headhunters, and your experience of the process.

The research is being conducted by Scarlett Brown, a Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Management at King's College London, and will be supervised by Dr Elisabeth Kelan, Senior Lecturer in the same Department. Further details on the project can be found in at www.gettingonboard.com

To indicate your potential interest in participating in this research study, please email Scarlett (scarlett.brown@kcl.ac.uk). Scarlett is compiling a broad mix of potential candidates and is keen that participants come from as wide a range of professional backgrounds as possible to ensure the validity of the research.

Your participation in the study would bring valuable insight to the understanding of the board appointment process and we do hope you will consider taking part.

Best wishes

Scarlett Brown
PhD Student
Department of Management, King's College London

Appendix V - interview Guide

First Interview	
Consent	Thank you for taking part in this research. Before we start, can you confirm you have read the information sheet? Is there anything you would like to ask or clarify? Please can you fill in and sign the consent form.
About You	To start us off, I would like to learn more about your career so far, and how that has led to you wanting to seek board roles?
Search for roles	How have you gone about seeking a board position? Do you have any key strategies? What has proved most useful so far? How have you drawn upon your networks and relationships with people in the search for a board appointment?
Ideal Board Member	How does an ideal board member look for you? What do you think makes you suited to being a director? What are your key strengths that would be helpful for being on a board? Is there anything you are lacking, or any experience you wish you had? How will you remedy that?
The appointment process	Have you had any interviews with boards or headhunters for specific board roles? How have they gone?
Additions	Is there anything else you would like to add or you would like to clarify?
Thanks	Thanks very much for making the time for this interview available in your busy schedule. That is much appreciated. I will be in touch to arrange the next interview.

Second Interview	
Continuation	Can you tell me what has happened since last we spoke with regards to your search for a board position? *Follow- up: have you had any progress with anything, or any failure?* How has that changed or affected your search?
Search for roles	*If continuing search* Has your way of searching for a board position changed since we last talked? What has proved most useful so far? What is your plan for the next stage? *If stopped searching* Why have you given up your search? *If success* What do you think was the most significant in helping you gain your position? Is there anyone or anything that has changed since the last interview with regards to your networks? How have you continued the search for board roles? who would you say has been most helpful in your search for a board position?
Ideal Board Candidate	Has your perception of what it takes to be on board changed since we last spoke? Have you developed your skill set with a view to getting onto a board since we last spoke?
The appointment process	Have you had any interviews with boards or headhunters for specific board roles? How have they gone?
Additions	Is there anything else you would like to add or you would like to clarify?

Third Interview	
Continuation	Can you tell me what has happened since last we spoke with regards to your search for a board position? *Follow- up: have you had any progress with anything, or any failure?* How has that changed or affected your search?
Search for roles	*If continuing search* Has your way of searching for a board position changed since we last talked? What has proved most useful so far? What feedback have you received on your search so far? *H*ow has that made you feel about the process and your ability to be a director? What is your plan for the next stage? *If stopped searching* Why have you given up your search? What feedback have you received on the process? *If success* What do you think was the most significant in helping you gain your position? What feedback helped you most in securing this position?
Ideal Board Candidate	Has your perception of what it takes to be on board changed since we last spoke? Have you developed your skill set with a view to getting onto a board since we last spoke?
Appointment process	Have you had any interviews with boards or headhunters for specific board roles? How have they gone?
Additions	Is there anything else you would like to add or you would like to clarify?
Thanks	Thanks very much for making the time for this interview available in your busy schedule. That is much appreciated. I will be in touch once we have finalised the report.

Appendix VI – **Transcription**

The form of transcription used in this thesis is verbatim text and includes some aspects of Jefferson transcription, listed below.

Punctuation is used throughout to add clarity. Most commonly I added commas (,) question marks (?) colons (:) and semi colons (;)where grammatically necessary to add clarity to the text.

- is used to denote occasions where the speaker ends a sentence or word abruptly but without pausing.

[ ] Words inside square brackets I have added for clarification, or in replacement of words that have been redacted.

[…] Denotes redacted text. This is only used when leaving the text in would have jeopardised the anonymity of the speaker.

(.) Micro pause; a notable pause but of no significant length.

(0.2) A number inside brackets denotes a timed pause (0.2 = 2 seconds). This is a pause long enough to time and subsequently show in transcription.

^ ^ these symbols around talk show that this speech was spoken more softly than the person's usual speech.

CAPITALS where capital letters appear it denotes that something was said loudly or shouted

" " talk in speech marks is used when the interviewee is quoting someone else.

hehe or HEHE denotes laughter or loud laughter.

= The equal sign represents latched speech or a continuation of talk

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